Traumatic Memories and Politics: From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood

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Do we as sociologists have anything to say when it comes to ethics in our times? In the paper that follows, I suggest that this is indeed the case.

But let me start first with a poem since my suggestion is actually an attempt to create a lyrical sociology:

Say this city has ten million souls, some are living in mansions, some are living in holes: Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us. Once we had a country and we thought it fair, Look in the atlas and you'll find it there: We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now….

This excerpt from a poem called Refugee Blues by W. H. Auden, written shortly before the outbreak of World War II, is a poet's outcry for a more humane world, for a world without cruelty. It is a poet's wish that his words can make for a better world by displaying compassion for others. Compassion plays a major role here. Compassion -- the organized campaign to lessen the suffering of strangers -- is in my opinion a distinctly modern form of morality. It played an historically important role in the rise of modern society, and it continues to

play an important role today. And if we understand the nature of compassion and its connection to social structure, we can explain many social movements today that otherwise seem accidental and unprecedented. Moreover, we can also try to understand the politics of trauma and reconciliation, which is of course what we try to talk about today.

Politically, this outcry for compassion is couched in the language of human rights. It means first of all "never again" – Nunca Mas. Never again means much to many, but also many different things. As an apparently new language, it has been surprisingly under-conceptualized. Are we talking politics? If so, what kind of political implications do human rights have? Or are we talking aesthetics, which implies a kind of never again **sentiment** – a feeling without a great many political consequences? This brings us full circle to the outcries of poets and intellectuals.

In my opinion many philosophers have created a system of ethics outside the world of social actors. These systems are very thought out, very systematic but they hardly speak to the people they are supposed to reach. On the other hand, a sociology of the global word cannot think in such universal philosophical terms. We need to search for globally relevant ethics of a world full of risks and uncertainties. Therefore, an important and crucial part of my proposal – which I am doing together with the sociologist Ulrich Beck - is to try and discover the

creation of a cosmopolitan sociology of morals. But also here, one needs to remain modest about what can be achieved and what remains an intellectual illusion.

Whereas in philosophy, morality needs to be universal to be considered valid, in sociology other rules apply. Thus, we need to ask relevant questions which pertain to the way actors in cosmopolitan modernity explain the world to themselves and act upon it. We need to inquire into the perspective of the interface between particular action and universal explanations of those actions by looking at a complex picture combining cultural meanings and social structures when it comes to the phenomenon of a cosmopolitan ethics.

Some researchers have focused on organizational needs and constraints; others have looked at moral actors as moral heroes who are disconnected from the social world by their status of holiness. No social analysis would be possible there. But a cosmopolitan sociology needs to combine both. I want to show how local cultural conventions determine to a certain extent what counts as morally relevant from society to society. Thus, what Ulrich Beck and I call a cosmopolitan methodology asks to press beyond the purported inconsistency between a moral horizon shared by many people and the equally undoubted individualism and public indifference of modern society. How to solve this theoretical quagmire?

We suggest a moral perspective based on actors' historical experiences and horizons which we call "the ethics of never again."

Take human rights for example: Human rights in this respect are first of all based on memories of evil, which are then translated into the hope that such evil will not recur. This is the meaning of the cry “never again” that motivated the human rights regime especially after World War II. Hence the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 states in its preamble: “whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind...” – a paradigmatic example of the ethics of "Never again."

We need to establish that we call the ethics of “Never again” connects the evils of nature with evil constructed by men in the cosmopolitan consciousness of our times. This is what distinguished it from the cosmopolitanism of old which was based on hope for a better future. Never again means never again in general but also in particular: never again Holocaust and genocide, never again communism and other dictatorships, never again apartheid, never again Fukushima. "Never again" connects universal principles with particular concerns. In many ways, it operationalizes cosmopolitan consciousness and creates a cosmopolitan sociology of morality.

The ethics of "never again" is not based on abstract theories alone, but on past experiences often called history. Thus, "Never Again" can never be unified, but needs to be based on multiplicity. A methodological cosmopolitanism can come to terms with those questions of ethical avoidance by looking at actors and how they perceive the world and act on their perceptions in a transnational world. The ethics of "Never again" connects man made catastrophe to natural catastrophe within a future oriented sociology of world risk society. "Never again" for particular victims of a specific case or "never again" for all cosmopolitan citizens of world risk society will be – in my opinion - one of the major questions of a future oriented sociology.

A cosmopolitan methodology uses "story-telling" as main device. We need to tell stories and listen to stories about how cosmopolitanism and an ethics of "never again" actually works. Telling stories about people’s lives prevents the search for abstract theory which was characteristic for sociology for such a long time. But telling stories does not mean to get lost in the private worlds of individual narratives. The cosmos is always there. In the end it is about sociological hope. And hope is precisely what you need when you don’t know what the future will be and a world order collapse. If you know the future, there is no need for hope.

Let me illustrate this: In a famous essay entitled “The Liberalism of Fear”, Judith Shklar makes an insightful distinction that applies to this historical juncture. Borrowing from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1841 essay “The Conservative,” Shklar distinguishes between the “party of memory” and the “party of hope.” Memory here is not merely a vehicle for the transmission of knowledge but a framework for creating an awareness of past evils. Memory (and trauma for that matter) ensures that the permanent stain of past rights abuses serves as a reminder of the human potential for evil. For an ethics of never again, a focus on too much hope, including utopian visions, carries the danger that we might become forgetful of the evils of the twentieth century, which persist for instance in the form of human rights violations. These are the memories of a world in disarray and the constant possibility that civilized society is nothing more than a flimsy veneer. Thus, an ethics of never again (like human rights for example) cannot be grounded in nature, since nature has played too many cruel tricks on humankind. And ethics of never again, must be grounded in the dystopian consciousness of a fragile world. Politics thus attempts to prevent the worst from happening.

Thus, if politics is utopian, why not take the road to trauma and its overcoming which has currently become part of our political language? I am sure you noticed how this psychological concept has come to our aid when it comes to explain politics. If the consequences of devastating events for individuals and

collectivities run different courses, why do we use the word trauma to explain a wide array of social and cultural phenomena? Trauma has traveled far from describing wounds to the body, for which the term was originally conceived, to encompassing injuries of the spirit, culture, society, and politics. Trauma has proliferated into a metaphor used to explain almost everything unpleasant that happens to us as individuals and as members of political communities. Thus, a concept whose use was originally intended for individuals has been transferred to social and political groups, seemingly without harm to the concept itself. How do we conceptualize the transition from the traumatized individual to the traumatized community? What does the concept of trauma – and "suffering as a universal frame" – mean for a theoretical formulation of collective memory? And what does it mean for a newly conceived ethics?

Trauma is also about time, but not about historical one but a kind of mythical never ending present of pain and suffering.

Let me give you an example from the Middle East where I come from. I am not sure what can be learned from it but please bear with me for a minute. I want to talk to you about why amongst other things the Oslo Accords of 1993 failed. Both Palestinians and Israelis negotiated at the time as if history, historical legitimacy and traumatic memories did not exist. Both sides knew that taking about historical justice and traumatic pasts would ultimately lead to the fall back of primordial positions. The past is nothing else but a virtual time – a text if you like – which is about self-justification. Only in the present you can meet and

make peace. Thus, there was a self-imposed amnesia about crucial issues during the times of negotiations. The Oslo Accords failed and the enemies of peace on both sides reminded everybody that justice and memory are indeed intertwined.

What does that mean? Wherever one looks, one finds people trying to communicate their pain. This psychological credo asserts that unpleasant memories are repressed and that only truth will set us free; it also claims that all traumata are created equal, whether we suffered an unhappy childhood or the experience of a concentration camp. It seems that “surviving” has become key to describing the mere fact of being alive. How has a term originally used to describe a blow to the tissues of the body, and then to the structure of the mind, traveled such a long road to become one of modern culture's master concepts? Essential to the theoretical vantage point explored in this study is asking how these metaphors of trauma facilitate the appropriation of a culturally celebrated status of victimhood. In other words, how has the concept of suffering developed into a universal framework for understanding memory politics? Have we gained through the concept of trauma? Can trauma explain politics?

Reading through the trauma literature one sees more often than not a de-contextualized flood of words unclear to most readers. In the end we are left with representation and not with events, and as a consequence deal with the crisis of representation instead of the crisis of history. As much as we are

tempted to use “trauma” as a key concept in contemporary politics, we should be aware of its limits. What are these limits of traumatic discourse in politics?

Trauma claims for itself the very idea that we are all victims. It implies a conversion experience as the exposure to trauma involves a redemptive departure from the original traumatic experience. Under a particular system of victim consciousness you need a distinction between perpetrator and victim. Under this, there can be no victim without a perpetrator -- and conversely, to call someone a victim is to instantly accuse someone else of being a perpetrator. However, in the universalist trauma conception, the concentration on perpetrators undercuts the whole idea of victim consciousness; all victims are deserving.

Thus, whenever we talk trauma we should remember that we are still dealing with people who were killed by other people, and people who were deprived of their “right to have rights”. Catastrophes were and are real, and it is this reality that defines political responsibility in our age. If we think trauma to be a useful concept, we should always keep its human and historical dimension in mind while keeping its structural elements at bay.

What matters here is neither the ontological status of bodily frailty nor the instrumental aspects of this ethics. What is more important is the recognition,

mediated through cosmopolitan memories of past abuses, of the body's universality as it becomes inscribed in popular imagination and legal doctrine. Look for instance at the institutionalization of human rights with a concomitant juridification of politics. Rather than start from a somewhat abstract notion of political interests (grounded, for instance, in power or capital), I would like to argue that an ethics of never again once institutionalized in international humanitarian law, constitute political interests themselves by shaping power balances, and by extension the contours of sovereignty.

What do I mean by this process of the shaping of sovereignty? I would like to argue that cosmopolitanized memories of state failures to prevent human rights abuses, meaning stories people tell themselves about cruelty in the past and the present and want this never to happen again pose a direct challenge to the political theory of Thomas Hobbes, who provided the foundational assumptions of modern sovereignty. The shift toward human rights and the concomitant transformation of nation-state sovereignty raise new questions about the Hobbesian quid pro quo of freedom and protection. Hobbes is still important today. He wrote that people's assessment of the degree of security the state can provide is directly proportional to how insecure they feel. Fear of violent death and the desire for self-preservation led to the acceptance of the *Leviathan* as the ultimate protector, and this essentially supplied the rationale for the legitimacy of modern state sovereignty. Thus Hobbes starts from the assumption of "Never

again Civil War" and therefore introduces the strong state which transcends all factions.

However, a cosmopolitan ethics of never again (like the human rights regime) also seeks to free people from the fear of violent death. Both the Leviathan and the legitimating power of the human rights regime are predicated on their ability to inspire fear of punishment and violation. Hobbes refers to a “state of nature” characterized by anarchy and war of all against all inspired by the constant threat of civil war. His description conjures up imagery of violent death that ultimately explains the delegation of legitimate authority to the state in return for protection. Social memories of actual history become significant, however, when states stop being protectors and become violators.

An important example in this respect is the systematic destruction of European Jewry, iconicized in our memory as the Holocaust, as well as other forms of genocide, which demonstrated that people are not only mortal but can be disposed of at will by a brutal and sovereign state. Never again or "nunca mas" in this case not only refers therefore to the protection by the state but moreover protection from the state.

“Freedom from fear” is the memory of what Europe had become, now refracted through the prism of totalitarianism that informed the new politics of human

rights and its ethics of never again. We are talking here about the freedom from the abuse of power and intimidation of the defenseless that difference invites. Contrary to the imaginary Hobbesian notion of the “natural condition of mankind,” from which the sovereign leads his subjects into the promised land of political security, the ethics of never again looks at totalitarian regimes not as intellectual constructs but the result of political memory, namely, the memory of Europe before, during, and after World War II. Just think of Orwell's 1984. Safeguarding against cruelty as effectively as possible in the future is the universal aim of the ethics of never again. Political memories of totalitarianism are based not on future hopes for a better world but on past memories of a cruel and evil one. One cannot predict the future but what we can is fear the past.

Clearly there are challenges to this ethics of never again and these are challenges facing society as well as the science of society, namely sociology.
Sociology is a child of that national gaze, more than that, it provided the tools of understanding and legitimizing the nation. The cosmopolitan plea of the Enlightenment was silenced by the voices who asked to be free under the guidance of the nation. Nation and society became one. But it is not enough just to argue that human rights need to be respected and that we should all be enlightened. We need to be first be local before we become global. It is the polis which defines the cosmos in the cosmopolitan enterprise.

Let me illustrate this with an example:

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, international politics has left the realm of calculability, and the generally accepted rules of warfare have been renegotiated. The Westphalian order, grounded on the notion that a stable and peaceful political order can be maintained only by mutually supportive vows of non-intervention between political entities, no longer holds. The modern human rights regime is premised on the notion that the prevention of human suffering takes precedence over the principle of sovereignty. This is the opposite of Hobbes's argument and runs counter to the state's claim to provide security. The perceived suffering of strangers and the impulse to alleviate that suffering is one of the unintended consequences of the global process. Yet there is built-in tension between human rights and security. Thus, Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly states, *"Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."* Security of person has become a human right in itself and this also as a consequence of the ethics of never again. This principle may stand in complete contradiction to the first principles of the declaration: *"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood* [Article 1] and *Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made*

on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty [Article 2].”

Fear of violent death clashes automatically with the fear of the suspension of human rights. Liberty is the foundation of human rights, but liberty must be defended if human rights are to be secured. And this is not only a language game of the ethics of never again but a true dilemma of cosmopolitan politics.

The political thinker Hannah Arendt was aware of this right after World War II. When she formulated her “perplexities of human rights” in her *Origins of Totalitarianism* right after the events of the Holocaust became known, she felt that the principles of human rights had failed to avoid the slaughter of the innocent during World War II: *“The Rights of Man, after all, had been defined as ‘inalienable’ because they were supposed to be independent of all governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them”* (1958, 291–92). Things have changed in our global age, but the problems remain similar. Today the threat of terror is more universal than ever before. This is what connects recent terrorist acts with the totalitarian ideologies of the

twentieth century and makes Arendt's analysis of them so starkly applicable to our dark times. Thus, we have reached the limits of the ethics of never again.

States are the foundation of international law, even though the concept of crimes against humanity undermines the state-centered outlook of international law and stresses the notion of human rights beyond states. At the same time, terrorism is first of all a crime against humanity, since humanity's basic principle is protection against violent death. The initial definition of crimes against humanity specified that they were crimes against civilian populations. It implied a personal responsibility for crimes that goes beyond one's state loyalties. Consequently, "wars on terrorism" cannot be the struggle of one state alone; they need to be conducted in concert with all concerned about the survival of the social contract. In order for that contract to survive, the modern state cannot breach the law to save itself. This is the major challenge that states fighting terrorism face today. Security and human rights are not mutually exclusive. They cannot be, for security is a human right. As such, there can be no league of enlightened republics working hand in hand when people do not feel secure in their homes or outside them. This is accepting political reality without giving in to illusions.

What does this mean for a new cosmopolitan ethics?

These are first of all the traumas reflected on the world stage, which emerge from the violation of the fundamental principles of modernity, and which raise awareness of the existence and sacred character of these fundamental principles. It is public outrage which initially creates and sharpens the awareness of norms and *retrospectively* establishes the public-political nature of action. It is the negation of the fundamental principles of modernity or of human co-existence altogether that brings their importance, their sacredness, their immanent metaphysics into view in the first place, so opening up a new, cosmopolitan horizon of responsibility, which is concretized through the establishment of norms and the setting up of organizations like the UN Security Council, International Court of Human Rights in the Hague etc. All of them are based on an ethics of never again. In this way "never again" not only express experienced but anticipated threats to humanity and therefore becomes paradoxically part of the enlightenment by trying to avoid what has happened before.

The possibility and reality of the negation of the fundamental principles of modernity, emerging with the radicalization of modernity, compels a reintroduction of the concept of “evil”? Evil would then denote actions and ideas beyond concepts and imagination, beyond any kind of justification, beyond any kind of defense, beyond crime, because crimes take place within the framework of the law and are subject to procedures of sentencing and punishment. We know since Kant, that evil is the reverse of freedom, not as deficit, but as a

fundamental component of what simultaneously presupposes and negates human existence. The power of those who negate the fundamental principles of modernity grows in radical asymmetry to the impotence of those who adhere to these basic principles. Not “hell is us”, but: on the basis of freedom and the victory of modernity human beings can build hell on earth.

Thus to come to conclusion: A new creed emerges from reflection on the shock of the violation of basic norms of human co-existence: *Never again!* As anticipation of future violations this is transformed into a new, and a new kind of mobilizing force. The human rights regime is just one example of this process. In this view human rights are not based on clear-cut philosophical or religious world views, but rather on historical experiences and concomitant memories of catastrophes. The 20th century came to an end with a capitulation before the future. The age of ideologies, of the radical utopias of modernity, of metaphors of revolution aiming at a deliberate alteration of the fundamental structure of society has exhausted itself. The utopian energies are used up (“end of history”). The residual utopias are technologically and economically determined. It is apparently no longer a matter of goals, but of the modernizing, balancing of means. That also means we have to distinguish between war, nuclear bomb, ethnic cleansing and other manifestations of “more modernity” – ethnic and ethical cleansing and genocide as extreme form of nationalist modernity, war as the continuation of politics or as the end of politics, nuclear

weapon as deterrence, deterrence as insurance. These are all different aspects of modernity. In then end, then, it’s a matter of judgment and what we suggest is something like a “cosmopolitan faculty of judgment” – that is, where identities and universal standpoints can be pulled together and which enables us to distinguish between good and evil. Judging is about the relation between the particular and the universal and judging is cosmopolitanism in action and constitutes the foundation of our realist cosmopolitanism for social scientists and global citizens alike.

Thus, in the end, we are likely to find ourselves as intellectuals, political philosophers and sociologists facing a situation in which our chief task is not to imagine better worlds but rather to think how to prevent worse ones. Maybe that's more than can be wished for.