

# Building peace over war ashes

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## Resumen

En el presente artículo, se investiga la relación que existe entre la memoria histórica y la construcción de la paz en el presente y en el futuro. Siguiendo el espíritu y la letra de la *Carta de la paz dirigida a la ONU*, los autores de este artículo, defienden la necesidad de superar los absurdos resentimientos que proceden de los conflictos del pasado para edificar un mundo más pacífico. Para ello, identifican algunos serios obstáculos y razonan la necesidad de desarmar la historia y de transmitirla con la máxima objetividad a las generaciones venideras.

## Abstract

This article looks at the links between historical memory and peacebuilding in the present and the future. In accordance with the spirit and contents of the Letter for Peace to the United Nations, the authors of the article defend the need to overcome resentment deriving from past conflicts to build a more peaceful world. They identify a number of serious obstacles and argue for the need to disarm history and pass it on with the maximum level of objectivity to the generations to come.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the century we have left behind, much genocide and crimes against mankind were committed. If those historic episodes were horrible and appalling, the task of overcoming and rebuilding a society that has suffered that horror is complex and difficult. We enter a new century and, for many groups, cultures, peoples and nations, a path to reconciliation begins, which is far from being easy.

Is it possible to forget History? Is it plausible to make a fresh start? Who would dare to ask, or even to insinuate, to a massacred people to forget that part of their history? Who would dare to ask for those atrocities to be forgotten? Bosnia, Herzegovina, Chile, South Africa, Russia, Rwanda, Guatemala and Chechnya are faced with the quandary of setting the foundations for a new coexistence. They want to live peacefully, but they must build over the ashes of a recent and terrifying past. The duty to remember constitutes a fundamental imperative, just as the exigency neither to perpetuate past conflicts nor to transmit resentments to the generations to come. The victims' memory is the gravitational centre of the anamnesis ethics, but the articulation of this memory should lead us to the origin of a new history, a new era based on reconciliation.

Avishai Margalit writes: "To the regrettably well-known question by Hitler: 'Who remembers the Armenians nowadays?' the clear answer should have been 'all of us' or, at least, 'the illustrated world remembers them'. Then, what must mankind remember? The answer says, in brief: mankind must remember the extraordinary shows of what is radically evil and the crimes against human kind such as, for instance, slavery, deportations of civilians and massive killings".<sup>1</sup>

In more than a few countries there are still inner wounds and deep breaches and their population is still divided, without having been able to carry out a reconciliation process sufficiently thorough so as to allow the harmonic development of society. These wounds may underlie in the group's imaginary, but they can reappear at any moment and generate new tensions within society.

We do not think that building a peaceful society has to be necessarily done through forgetfulness. Furthermore, the recent or distant horror can never be forgotten and mankind's task is to remember it in order not to repeat it ever. The great Jewish thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have reminded it once and again: Theodor Adorno in his magnificent radio conference in 1968, *Educating after Auschwitz*, but more recently, Avishai Margalit in the cited work *Ética del recuerdo (Memory's ethics)*, and Reyes Mate in *La memoria de los vencidos (The memory of the defeated)*. On many occasions, it is easier to negotiate the end of the conflict than to raise, rebuild societies, peoples, whole cultures that have suffered war. Building new infrastructures is not enough. Healing the wounds from the past is essential so that the creative energy of each generation will shine with all its intensity.

Once the war finished, it is necessary to gather, to raise, to build again; but before building, we must remove the rubble that prevent us from setting the foundations on a solid ground. Similarly to cities and villages, where the rubble produced by destruction have to be removed in order to build again, resentments among people, groups, peoples, races must also be removed since they constitute the first obstacle for peace building. And we can see how the memory of those events is transmitted to other generations, shouldering thus a resentful legacy that makes them be divided. And this is so because the memory, as the intelligence, is an emotional charac-

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1 A. MARGALIT, *Ética del recuerdo*, Herder, Barcelona, 2002, p. 67.

teristic; it is not neutral from the point of view of feelings, on the contrary, it is deeply rooted in them.

Previous to the publishing of Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence*, the Basque philosopher Xabier Zubiri already proved that *intelligence is feeling* in his homonym work, because so it is the ability to remember. Thereby, it is necessary to do an appropriate catharsis of memory, to put into practice a purgative of all those toxins that, in an invisible way, seriously pollute the spirit and prevent us from thinking. This is precisely what this article is about.

## 2. IDENTIFYING AND OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

We frequently see that the most basic things in life, those that are most obvious and evident, are the most difficult to realize or to accept. René Descartes defined evidence as that which is clearly and distinctively grasped, it is what needs no reasoning, since the brain neatly "sees" it, without giving a lot of thought to it.

However, on some occasions, we go over the evidences, we have them near, even under our eyes, but we do not see them as important or, simply, we leave them aside because we consider them simple or less transcendental. This somehow blind and absurd attitude generates the biggest obstacles to face the hard task of rebuilding after the conflict.

We point out just some –the most frequent– of the many "reasons" that make us not seeing what strikes as evident:

- The first one is the wish not to change our comfortable way of thinking and of living. We do not want to see what is evident because we do not want to assume what would be coherent: a change of attitude in our actions. We are not willing to accept those things that may affect our way of life.

- Ideological or religious reasons. We are so settled in and convinced of our truths, that we are not aware of the reality that surrounds us. Even if the things we may hint in it are more than obvious. We are like those people who search the light while looking at the sun, being thus unable to see any other light; they have been blinded by the light itself.

- Frequently, passion is another element that prevents us from getting near the reality and from discovering what reality is offering us. Our emotions flood our reason and do not let us see things

as they really are. How many resentments among people prevent them from looking at each other or, simply, from exchanging a word. We turn our back on it because we cannot open the padlock of the rancour, envy feelings, etc. The feelings lead us to enhance false idols, structures such as Nation that often demand heroic sacrifices, even human sacrifices.

- Prejudices. They often lead us to a lack of acknowledgment of reality because things are not always as we were taught or as we were shown before. I do not need to look at things because I already know how they are and, moreover, they cannot possibly surprise me since they would never change. It is not only that those people do not want to change; it is also that they think that a change in the others could never occur. Hans Georg Gadamer, father of the 20th century hermeneutic philosophy, clearly shows in his work *Verdad y método (Truth and Method)* (1960) that prejudices are anticipated visions of reality that make impossible its right interpretation. Only by being conscious of those prejudices can we get free from that biased vision derived from a look influenced by them.

There are more "reasons" not to be analysed at this moment. Being aware of the many "reasons" we have for our immobilism or comfort, alerts us to work for peace, to open our eyes and to give up ideologies, beliefs, idols, comforts and prejudices. When we face reconciliation processes we have to give up all those "reasons" that prevent us from realizing the things we have inside ourselves and those happening around us.

Being conscious of the amount of "reasons" leaked within us makes us more humble and prevents us from being preposterous. It opens us to dialogue, to encounters, to the possible solidarity. Accepting things and people just as they are is an important tool if we want to build a more solid peace.

## 3. HISTORIC RESENTMENTS

We began this article by underlining the hard task to rebuild a society that has been destroyed, decimated, by a conflict. And the inevitable task of removing rubble before rebuilding. This is useful at a personal, group, or social level. It is in line with this rubble removal that are some of the contribu-

tions made by the Peace Letter addressed to the UN.<sup>2</sup>

Nowadays, nobody would dare to ask a society that has suffered the horror of war to opt to make a fresh start. Even though in many processes people have chosen a silence pact at the end of the conflict, sooner or later the need to do justice and to look for the historic truth will be imposed. And this is so because, without these elements, it is impossible to think about a reconciliation process that really reconciles. As Margalit says: “Making a successful memory brings the souvenir alive, whereas reviving brings the dead alive, in a spiritual not physical way.”<sup>3</sup>

We realize that, as strongly as those facts might be shown to us, *nowadays’ contemporary people are not responsible for the bad things that happened in history, simply because we were not there.* We are the result of that History, apart from not being of those bad things previous to us. And that History, with all its positive and negative things, has made our existence possible because, if it had been different—for better or worse—, other encounters, other links had occurred; other people had been born, but not us.

Peace building does not mean, at all, being amnesic. Peace building demands having memory and being able to build a future from that memory. It is necessary to remember, but without resentments. And even though many times we are not responsible for the past evils, it does not imply not acknowledging them in order, basically, not to repeat them. We must know History to come to build peace, but we must transmit it without remorse, without passing the past wounds on to the future generations. Margalit says: “We cannot have any influence on the past, we cannot prevent its happening, we cannot bring it back to life, neither physically nor spiritually. We can only modify, improve or flood with life the *descriptions* of the past.”<sup>4</sup>

Peace in the future partially depends on the memory transmission or, better, on the way it is transmitted. It is essential to be objective, to look for balance, to keep a distance from the object being studied but, moreover, to have freedom of criteria, to be able to avoid external influences and pollutions. This task cannot be done individually; on the contrary, it

demands the necessary dialogue, even with those that do not take part in my ideological and religious perspective. Only in this way can be transcended the endogamic and solipsistic tendency that so bad consequences has to forge a credible history.

A person can reconcile with the evil suffered by his past generations. But, how can he forget it? Reconciling does not mean forgetting. Forgetfulness is a precariousness of memory, a weakness, a fragility of human mind. Furthermore, it does not depend on will because, on some occasions, we force ourselves to forget but we feel helpless and, although trying once and again, we do not manage to erase that episode from our mind. It is there and we must live with it. However, reconciliation implies a willing active attitude that really allows us to live peacefully. Reconciling is being conscious of and knowing about the past. And, from this point, being able to *discover in the executioner’s newly born child the same innocence as in the child of the murdered.*

In this respect, the contribution of the Peace Letter addressed to the U.N. is in line with the historic resentments. It points out the line that differentiates direct resentments from the indirect and underlines the absurdity of historic resentments: those that, without knowing it, we inherit from the previous generation, which many times has also inherited them from the previous one, and now nobody remembers how the conflict began and who were the actors.

Historic resentments result from a series of events that we did not live and did not suffer, but, as we remember them, we live them in the present. How can we feel again something that we have not experienced? And how many times the social communication media and the environmental culture make us experiencing them as present and make us actors of events with which we had nothing to do. We do not even have someone to blame on.

The *Peace Letter* states it in its first point: “*We the contemporary people are not to blame for the bad things happened in History simply because we did not exist*”.

And in spite of having “agreed” on peace, societies and groups go on getting armed, mistrusting their neighbours because of some past situations that we are forced to live in the present and this

2 Sections I and IV of the *Peace Letter addressed to the U.N.* [www.cartadelapaz.org].

3 *Ética del recuerdo*, p. 60.

4 *Ética del recuerdo*, p. 58.

leads us to a permanent defenceless state. The past is the pretext to hate, to destroy, to annihilate. We are waiting for any false move of the other because, as our history books say, “they always acted like that”, and they will do it again sooner or later. If we cannot stop looking at the other peoples of the world with rancour or historic resentments, it will be difficult to consolidate peace. The resentment gene does not exist. We are the ones who pass it on to the generations to come, but it is not a historic misfortune. It is possible to stop that transmission, to impose responsibility, to hold on the tendency to spread rancour or, at least, to look for evasive mechanisms not so harmful for the ones to come. We devote enormous efforts to achieve peace and we hope that our efforts will be useful to reap, at the right moment, the fruits of dialogue, of good coexistence, and of solidarity. But suddenly, and almost without knowing how or when, examples of violence and conflicts that we thought to be extinguished and buried reappear.

And this is because most of the times historic resentments are buried, but they are still alive under the earth. They cannot be seen, but they are there, as if they were “personal mines”, even more difficult to remove than mines. Therefore, we think we are working on a peaceful society without any apparent danger, but suddenly our feet touch those resentments and then conflicts that we considered to be closed and forgotten explode. Politicians, journalists, and historians have a special responsibility in the management of the past.

In order to achieve a peace work, we will have to see which are those historic resentments underlying population and peoples, be aware of them and, as far as possible, deactivate them. And one of the ways of deactivating them is to make people realize of something as evident as that: we contemporaries are not responsible for what happened in History, simply because we did not exist. Such an obvious thing is an urgent task if we want to achieve a more solid and long-lasting peace.

#### 4. DISARMING HISTORY

No matter the angle from which we look at it, we are historic: we are beings that have depended on history to exist. As Rubio, co-author of the Peace

Letter addressed to the U.N., states: “*any thing different from what was done at our origin would have caused our non-existence*”.<sup>5</sup> This evidence, which is so clear and limpid, means such a huge punch for some people, that they totally reject it.

And we see that most of the conflicts we are now living become perpetual precisely for not realizing this evidence: if history had been different, our present would be different and we would not exist. The section IV of the *Peace Letter* says:

“It is fruitful to know History as much as possible. But we see that we cannot turn it backwards. We also see that if History had been different –better or worse–, the future would have been different. During the time other encounters, other links would have occurred; other people would have been born, not us. None of us, who have the chance to exist, would exist.

It does not suggest at all that the evil caused by our predecessors was really evil. We censure it, repudiate it, and we do not want to repeat it. The surprise of existing will allow us to happily make an effort to solve the consequences of the evil previous to us”.

The past is irrevocable. In spite of the negative weight of History (injustices, lack of solidarity, killings, impositions, genocide, etc.), we are the direct result of a specific set of historic episodes. We may not know them, we may be in conflict with our origins, but we are the result of a historic process and, although it does not deny our personality and our singularity in history, it represents the condition of possibility. It is undeniable that our existence is due to it, which does not mean, as we mentioned before, that we are responsible for that situation, even if we are one of its direct effects. Many people do not quite see such a simple premise is this. On the contrary, some think that if History would have been different, they would have existed in any other way. The evidence is masked by the arrogance of being. They do not understand nor accept the contingency of being.

If we discover existence as the greatest good we have –since without it other goods such as life, love, friendship, freedom, peace... would not be possible–

5 A. RUBIO, *22 Historias clínicas –progresivas– de Realismo Existencia*, Edimurtra, Barcelona, 1981, pp.15-16.

and if we accept that we are historic beings, the result of that specific history, just as it happened and not otherwise, we will be immune to any historic resentment that may leak when misusing or abusing from (historic) memory. Consequently, we will want to have history shown and taught in the most objective possible way. The family, group, national history, the best moves, the mistakes, even the wickedness and the injustices... everything becomes different when we realize that only this history –and not any other– made our existence possible.

Feeling this surprise of existing, together with the experience that we may have not existed, make a happy feeling arise inside ourselves because of existing. Those good or bad facts have been, as a whole, something necessarily good for us, something good in an ontological sense, i.e., concerning our being, and have made our specific and real existence possible. Such surprise and happiness are terribly demanding because, if we are happy of living, we can neither refuse nor constantly complain about everything that was necessary and made our genesis possible. Quite on the contrary, this happiness for existing must drive us to work industriously in order to repair, as much as possible, our present. The happiness of existing with others is the driving force for the hard task of building peace at this moment.

It is important to know History, but it is very different to know it having previously accepted it with joy, its delights as well as its heartaches, from knowing it with rage and rejection.

History is the master of life so that we learn not to repeat the disastrous events that occurred and that we criticize so much. We must know how to filter all the positive things and to enrich that legacy with our supporting action in the present. We want to believe in the usefulness of remembering, in the need of making efforts to communicate what happened to those that have just arrived into History. We want to imagine that the victims' memory will not be in vain, that it is not only a way of doing justice to them, but of preventing the current and future generations from the evil that might attack.

This joyful acceptance of History is far from implying that we do not acknowledge that the past wickedness was really evil. One thing is the ontological acceptance and a different one is its ethic acceptance. It is essential to publicly regret what happened, to accept that institutions had a special significance in those atrocities, that they are able to clearly and limpidly regret it and, furthermore, that

they see to it that the harm caused by those atrocities is compensated. The present heads of such institutions must not feel guilty because they are not responsible for what happened in the past. But they cannot wash their hands of the harm caused in the past by the institutions they lead right now.

As the historian Carlos Martínez Shaw says: “We must, therefore, acknowledge the past, but we must also judge it. We cannot accept the ethic relativism. We believe that there are some human behaviour conditionings, but we also believe in man's freedom. We cannot envelop the past with a cloak of indifference if we do not do so with the present. If we are glad to exist and, on the other hand, we cannot intervene in the evolution of past events –since we did not exist–, then it is licit being glad of how it happened (and it does not mean, we insist on it, that we ethically justify them), because it made our existence possible (...) This is why the last paragraph of this point IV ends up saying: we censure, repudiate, and do not want to repeat the wickedness generated by our ancestors.”

## 5. THE ENGAGEMENT TO IMPROVE THE PRESENT

But from a sociological point of view, it is easier and more comfortable to draw people's attention towards criticising and slandering the evils from the past, than to lead them to see the current evils, to differentiate them, and to make all the possible efforts to correct them or, even more, to foresee and avoid them. Sometimes, through criticising the past, we do not want to see the contemporary or modern atrocities. Many leaders are interested in keeping people blind concerning the present. This distracting method is essentially instrumental and has to be criticized by intellectuals with lucidity. History can neither be the cover of the current problems nor the throwing weapon to revenge or to please the electors.

History is for sure the master of life and it is necessary to avoid repeating in the present our ancestors' mistakes. Hiding or deforming personal, group or world history is a serious obstacle to build a peaceful society. It means wanting to transform history into a weapon that we throw against other peoples as an offence or a prejudice. As time goes by, it becomes a devastating weapon for coexistence between peoples.

Knowing that without that history we would not exist means taking the fuse off that historic weapon and welcoming the will to know all the good and bad things that made our existence possible. It is from this knowledge, free from guilt and rancour, that we can begin working on the present so as to compensate, as far as possible, the consequences of that wickedness still prevailing in the present.

Nowadays nobody denies that it is good and necessary to know history. And this is why we cannot stop guarding against the abuses that might occur against it. Tzvetan Todorov says that we are in a period when western people, and particularly the Europeans, seem to be obsessed with the cult of memory. He points out that, even though we must try to keep the souvenir alive, idolizing memory is something arguable. We must be alert so that nothing takes us away from the present and, also, so that the future may not get out of our reach.<sup>6</sup>

We must not be ingenuous and we must not let us be blinded by false proud, by pseudo-ideologies or pseudo-religions. Free from resentments and prejudices, we must open our eyes to the reality and the history that made it possible. And we must see things just as they are, without fear, learning from what happened, knowing that the best way of acknowledging the past ethic mistakes is to work hard for the benefit of everyone, of all the contemporaries who are the fruit

from that same history that also made our existence possible.

Another contemporary author, the French historian Jacques Le Goff, an expert in the Middle Age with a large interdisciplinary career, reminds us that: the memory tries to preserve the past only for its usefulness concerning the present and the time to come. It does not escape to anybody that history can be used and manipulated according to interests that have nothing to do with the truth, the good, and the future of society. Just as Jürgen Habermas lucidly pointed out, reason does not operate in a neutral or pure way, it is always entangled with a series of interests and only from an open dialogue can we walk towards objectivity.

Therefore, let's see to it that collective memory be useful to liberate men, not to subjugate them.<sup>7</sup> This should be the ultimate essence of the philosophy of history, the ultimate objective of commemorating processes.

At a moment as this one, when laws to recover historic memory are being developed in so many places around the world, this evidence pointed out by the point IV of the Peace Letter is the frame where we can recover history, study it, go further into it, but being "vaccinated" against any historic resentment that may blind us and take us away from our main end, which is, just as Todorov and Le Goff state, living in harmony the present and the future. ■

### LETTER OF PEACE addressed to the UN Foundation

The Letter of Peace addressed to the UN is a document written by a group of people with great concern for peace. It is addressed to all those who have a will for peace and want to work for it.

The Letter of Peace points out some principles upon which a solid and lasting peace can be based.

It was presented publicly for the first time in Barcelona (Spain) in April 22th, 1993. From that moment, it has been disseminated in more than 80 countries in five continents, gathering thousands of signatures, testimonies and support form international institutions and celebrities that work in favour of peace all over the world.

Based upon the Letter of Peace, new initiatives have sprung up supported by the Foundation:

- a.. Research: Institutes of Peace
- b.. Peace education: postgrades, courses in diferents universties
- c.. Geopeace
- d.. Dissemination and Promotion of Peace
- e.. Press service: The World in the key of Peace

6 T. TODOROV, *Los abusos de la memoria*, Paidós, Barcelona, 2000.

7 J. LE GOFF, *Histoire et mémoire*, Gallimard, París, 1988.