

A Path Toward a New Approach

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Opinion Article

The 9/11 catastrophe is an historical event, a deeply traumatic one, at many levels: for people who in this dreadful destruction lost their relatives, friends and colleagues, but also for western governments who thought that the USA was well protected against such attacks. Almost everyone in the world lived, through television, this incredible but real, significant and symbolic tragedy. If most of the people were shocked, amazed, and have experienced it like a thunderbolt in an open sky, we probably must admit now that 9/11 is the first attack in a long series which does not refer only to the USA. Given the significant role of the USA in the world, 9/11 is a worldwide event. Moreover, with a little distance, the reaction pointing terrorism as an “Axis of Evil” seems clearly insufficient. What if terrorism should be understood as a reaction to a previous event, at least as traumatic but inadequately thought and treated by western democracies and major international institutions? First, it should be outlined that explaining (or trying to explain) terrorism should not be interpreted to justify these acts of destructive violence. In this specific context, I wouldn’t fully subscribe to the famous quotation from Mme de Stael: “To understand is to forgive”, even if this idea is pleasant. However, trying to think what is happening now to us (I mean not only to “USA” but also to western democracies and many countries of Africa) supposes to put aside all forms of wishful thinking. Destructive violence in mankind, even if foolish, murderous and unreasonable, is supposed to have some logic. Understanding this destructive violence is a necessary condition for fighting it in a more intelligent way then– as always–war is. The choice is clear. If we don’t understand terrorism, which is part of our collective history, there is one path only to fight it: war, which is also destructive and jeopardizes our liberties [1].

However, if we do understand the roots of current terrorism, we can probably find other ways as well to fight it, for a better future to be shared with people coming from all parts of the world.

Up to now, all western governments, supported by their public opinion, seem to agree on this unique solution, “war against terrorism”, with the argument of self-defence. Let us keep this pretty tough argument, regarding the common sense, and let’s go back a little further in recent history, following the idea widely shared that to understand the present, it is necessary to go back to the past and set events in their historical context. It turns out that living in France, I’ve been deeply traumatized by what happened in the Balkans. Not only by the horrific crimes committed by Milosevic’s regime, but also by the reactions of this vague entity called the “International community”, and by the manner International courts treated this war–with the unconditional support of educated people–during more than twenty years [2].

I was deeply shocked by the patent ideas current amongst educated people about this war (despite major books and enquiries already

published), and by various declarations using–in western democracies–the way of thinking or the arguments of Milosevic’s propaganda. In 1991, even historians seemed to accept the main argument (seeming to legitimate revenge in their own minds) that (as said François Mitterrand) “Croatia was allied with the Nazis, Serbia wasn’t”. In other words, in 1991, the populations living in Croatia were still called “Ustachas” by many people (from both wings, right and left), as if decades hadn’t passed since WWII. And if I tried to explain what happened and why, it is also because (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia) ICTY1 and even (International Court of Justice) ICJ2 denied the “crime of aggression” committed by Milosevic’s regime, with–as the logical consequence–the denial of the right of self-defence for all the aggressed populations in Croatia, in Bosnia and in Kosovo. If the UN’s Justice denies this right to these populations, how can we argue for ourselves? Do we have a basic right that the others don’t have?

I can’t summarize here the work made over a twenty years period trying to enlighten what happened there and why. The goal was, of course: to become conscious and try to make decision makers conscious of their (and our) responsibilities [3].

This work was published in France in 2005, and verified by many people: this war triggered by Milosevic and his allies led to a repetition of a genocidal policy (which must be different by nature to “mass murder” and massacre) grounded in an unconscious denial shared during years by the most of decision-makers and intellectuals. Denial (or ignorance) concerning a traditional ideology in Serbia (ideology of “ethnic cleansing”, even though the main texts referring to this ancient and till current ideology, applied by Milosevic and the Cetniks, were published in France in 1934) and, most amazing: a denial concerning the role of the Serbian State and Serbian orthodox church during WWII. This last denial is the most amazing because the fact that Serbia was in 1942 the first European country declared “judenrein” by the Nazis was in principle known by historians. The result of this (unconscious) denial, or this repressed or forgotten knowledge (reinforced by half-century of totalitarianism and widely shared in Western democracies through various friendly and diplomatic collaborations with Tito’s Yugoslavia) was a repetition of a genocidal policy against all civilians (and a majority of them were the Muslims in Bosnia) who didn’t want the creation of a Great Serbia grounded in denial and systematic elimination of “non-Serb” populations in the territories that Milosevic wanted to conquer. In this context, it is crucial to outline that the non-nationalist Serbs (by this I mean, the normal people whom we could oppose to ordinary criminals, to borrow the expression used by Christopher Browning) who resisted this criminal policy were called “traitors” by the national-communist aggressors responsible for genocide, and are still sued in local courts for crimes against “the Serbs” (who supported Milosevic). Understanding what happened there supposes considering this war not only as a local war (nor a “civil war”, nor an “inter-ethnic” conflict), but

as a worldwide war on a limited terrain. There are many convincing arguments for adopting this worldwide perspective: 1) the UN—a worldwide institution—helped Milosevic with the weapons embargo (fearing probably that entire Europe would slide into chaos again and hoping probably for a quick victory of Serbia); 2) UN forces were present in Croatia and in Bosnia since 1991; their catastrophic failure in preventing genocide led people to think that the “International community” wanted them to be killed. (In one word, it led to a kind of paranoid discourse, apparently confirmed by the facts, following the same logic as Milosevic’s propaganda); 3) Through the label UN, the major governments involved there were: Great Britain, France, Russia, Belgium, Holland, United States; 4) On the other hand, the fact that in Bosnia, an important part of the population was Muslim (ever since the Turkish occupation) attracted logically—by identification—the attention of many other Muslims in the world [4].

Under these circumstances, facing these populations so deeply traumatized after such a failure in saving their families and dear fellow-believers, it is of course not sufficient to say: we didn’t want to. Moreover, nobody knows what the real goal of the UN was—each government pursuing its specific and unclear objectives with most of the time faulty analyses of the situation resulting of schematic knowledge completed by their own projections originating in their own histories.

I developed this clinical aspect in my work, with the knowledge that what we only know are the facts and what different people have said and commented? The truth lies necessarily between all the facts (which I call Real, which is stronger than realities partially fictitious or legendary) and the words (developing different analyses, opinions, etc., and potentially masking both the logic of the dynamic flow of events and the durable effects on people who survived).

What do we know for sure? We know that the Balkans were often the eye of different worldwide storms in history. In this respect, it seems historically reasonable, for the reasons given above, to think that, even if the context changes, the same causes produce the same effects...in another equivalent form. If historians accept generally the repetition in history, they always insist on differences, putting aside the mechanism of repetition, a clinical matter. Let’s go back to present: If I ask anybody what happened on 9/11, at least 90% of people will give without any hesitation the same answer. Now, if I ask to the same people what happened on 7/11, without giving the year, maybe 10% will know...in France, and probably less in the USA, even in literate and well-informed environments (or supposed to be so). I invite each of you to make the test. As writer, I don’t have the possibility to make a randomized trial, but I’m sure of this issue because of my experience over twenty years. Now, if I ask what happened on 7/11 six years before 9/11, maybe 20% will give the right answer in France (maybe I’m too optimistic). How much in the States? If you don’t find the answer, you may look at Islamic websites: most of them will give you the answer. This observation anybody can do (if you have this idea and don’t fear the Net police who will now automatically suspect you of terrorism) shows that a narrow link does exist between 7/11 in 1995 and 9/11 in 2001.

Most relevant detail: Al-Jazeera opened its office in Sarajevo 11/11th/11. Of course, it is a deliberate choice, a symbolic one, like a commemoration. Even if it does not seem scientific, following classical way of thinking, it is objective in the sense that anybody can verify the fact. I remind that twin towers (which design in space the form of 11) does exist also in Sarajevo. At least, they symbolize what most people

can’t imagine. I mean: the called “unthinkable” Real... and a strong discontent in civilization, to use Freud’s expression.

Speaking of terrorism, let us go back a bit more...during WWII. Under Nazi occupation in France, occupying forces used to call “terrorist” the resistance fighters. Of course, thanks to the victory of the Allies against the Nazis, the Resistant’s fight has been widely legitimated in our collective memory. But, as anyone can today attest, thanks to literature and numerous testimonies, history isn’t so simple if we consider the collaboration of many people and institutions with the Nazis. For decades, this debate took place in civil society and eventually, a law against negationism (which means what Anglophones call “Holocaust denial”) has been adopted in France on the 13th July 1990 under the name Loi Gayssot. (I remind that in name of free expression, Noam Chomski, using his international reputation, took the defence of Faurisson, one of our negationist historians; does it mean that Chomski, who is an important voice in intellectual field, feels free to deny genocide?)

Because of the specific tragedy of WWII, the spirit of this law Gayssot goes beyond the national framework, even if this law is as of now only French. This example shows well that a law isn’t a standard. While the law structures a social framework in an historical context, standards refer to manners vaguer, more situational, depending on living environments. In other words, you may behave yourself following the accepted or prescribed standards in your area or society while being at the same time an outlaw...all the while ignoring it.

Because I’m French speaking and living in France, but also Jewish by my mother and relatives living in Central Europe, this paper is to be heard within the wider and specific context which Former Yugoslavia belongs to, I mean not only the European Union, but our future Europe. But because I’m French, I’m not confusing Nazis—responsible of genocide—and German people, nor resistant fighters. Following and applying the same logic, I won’t be confusing Serbian people who fought Milosevic’s policy (in Croatia for instance, or even in Bosnia), and those— a majority— who supported his aggressive and criminal policy against populations and civilians in Croatia, in Bosnia, in Kosovo, particularly as his propaganda was clearly (for those who know history) negationist. Unfortunately, ICTY— declared incompetent to judge the crime of aggression— decided or twenty years that all the parties— Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia— were equally to be blamed. Moreover, this court started condemning those who were aggressed by JNA and Milosevic’s Forces. In the meantime, the dominant narrative, supported even by Carla del Ponte, was that all the parties should be condemned, all but the UN, who were present in the field at the outset. Not one expert that I know saw that ICTY has been unfortunately founded on a denial of aggression. And I suppose nobody but few people measured the extent of the strong and unthinkable violence of this denial, considering the nature of the crimes committed there.

Who were the true terrorists in 1991? Those who conducted a genocidal policy? or those who were aggressed by them and the true victims of this policy? We have known for at least one century that Serbia can lead us into worldwide war. Milosevic (who was never condemned) probably succeeded, with the unconscious help of what we call the “International community”. As David Rohde noticed it in his remarkable *A Safe Area: Srebrenica- Europe’s Worst Massacre*. Since the Holocaust, the weapons embargo decided in 1991 by the UN gave— cynically— the superiority to Milosevic. To be impartial, ICTY should have taken this undeniable fact into account, accepting the fact that the range of responsibilities were: first Milosevic and its allies, second the UN, and third (for some war crimes) the populations who

were aggressed. But as Raphael Lemkin wrote after WWII, a State or an Assembly of States will never condemn themselves. The present result is: the genocidal specificity of Milosevic's policy has never been plainly recognized by the UN– even if the word genocide has eventually been applied to the massacre perpetrated in Srebrenica, the 11th July 1995.

Following my analysis, published in France in 2005 and completed in 2014 by new contributions and documents 5, Islamic terrorism may be explained as a strong revenge resulting from this denial of justice. Their primary target are all the countries who were involved in this war: Great Britain, France, Soviet Union, USA, but also the different religions of the different actors. (One example among others: the Christian Coptes were targeted by DAESH in Egypt– this could refer to the fact that Boutros Boutros Ghali, who was the United Nations Secretary-General during this war, was Egyptian Copte.)

The originality of my contribution is to articulate academic history with psychodynamic clinic (with main reference to Ferenczi, Bion and clinical analysis of trauma) and to show that we can't think the Real–historically speaking– without thinking the mechanism of repetition– which is a clinical mechanism. What I'd like to make understandable now is that this approach, reporting the traumatizing experience of this war and of this denial of justice, opens new perspectives for the future, considering that all local populations also think that this war was a kind of repetition of WWII (I discovered that after my own work was published, when I went in Croatia and in Bosnia to share my work and to participate in various conferences). Of course, they don't have the same version of history. But their conclusion– under the concept of "repetition"– is the same and could be, I think, a useful tool to work on now with the younger generations, if conducted rigorously in a well-conceived framework. And, of course, if our goal is common: I mean, to reconstruct a civil peace without denying what happened there. Unfortunately, this new and constructive approach is meeting strong ideological resistances– particularly amongst academics– and the bad conscience of International institutions who would prefer to go to the future without understanding this recent past. remind the reader that it was exactly the Communist policy after WWII...and I suppose we have seen the result.

Therefore– because it is a question of unconscious denial and of a strong discontent in civilization which remains present through international terrorism– I recently published a lengthy conversation

with a psychoanalyst about my work 6: trying to open this delicate debate wider in the civil society. A debate that our medias and intellectuals until now didn't want to open, despite the fact most of them have read my work. Would they not have understood its logical consequences? Anyway, we know men have a selective memory and most of the time can't imagine what happen to others. Having a selective memory, they have a selective conscience, forgetting or repressing what they feel unpleasant for their own image. Moreover, they don't like really to think about the effects of their acts, especially when these effects are catastrophic and painful. At a collective level, this kind of mentality– encouraged by nation states– may be seen in the fact exposed above, 9/11 means something for "us", 7/11 means nothing for the majority of "us". Because of that, many people say: genocide is unthinkable. What I say is that 7/11 is a new worldwide irreparable catastrophe and we are living its consequences. Now intellectuals in France are sometimes afraid to speak about this situation. They say– as few political leaders have dared– that explaining is justifying. This discourse sounds like a way for justifying their own silence...or maybe their own denial. The result of this is a lack of constructive propositions, and an increasing terrorism. Therefore, I think that 7/11 should be a day of worldwide memory, at least in all countries involved– through the UN– in this tragic history. And we, belonging to the civil society, should be working hard in Europe, in the states and in Russia, with the younger generations, to make people conscious and to fight with cultural means this collective denial. The more we'll do that, using us intellect, our sensitivity, our knowledge, our critical mind, our liberty to think and us freedom to conduct relevant researches, the more credibility we'll have for killing true terrorists who want to destroy democracies and all beliefs but their own.

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