The Survivor Semantic

Explorative Paper

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This paper is an explorative effort more so than it is a presentation of actual data. Nonetheless, I deem it important for social researchers and intellectuals to continue to make observations, report on them and sometimes urge even action from this "making explicit" a social practice or pattern that might become troublesome at a future stage.

To begin with two observations:

In recent years I had occasions to follow the discourse on the biographical renderings and multi-generational transformations of the Holocaust discourse a little bit. Though I am certainly in no traditional sense an expert on this aspect of the Holocaust discourse itself – as e.g. Gabriele Rosenthal is – I kept an "ear open so to speak" for I am interested in the effects of media and particularly mass-media have on collective memory and biographical identity formation in modern societies, because I am seeking to find out what Citizenship means today. For Europe the Holocaust discourse and the "Never again!"-formula held a specific place in this regard. However, people involved in researching intergenerational biographical construction have as far as I can see rarely taken into consideration the effect that mass-media offerings have on the transformation of what we can loosely call "semantics", which in turn provide narrative structures for biography and identity formation.

Researchers into mass-media and modern societies have noticed transformations of semantics on a general level and I would suspect these enter collective memory structures and biographical accounts as well – both of families that have a deep Third Reich history, as well as the people on a more general societal level.

A second observation that not only I, but also several friends of mine, both academic and non-academic have made in several places in Germany, is that the German word for victim "Opfer!" has found an ever increasing pejorative use specifically by persons with a low educational background, if you forgive me for using such a rather tentative than defined category for this presentation.

My friend Birgit Dörle who worked for the past several years in a institution with young women from a troubled social backgrounds has made the observation of an increased use of "Opfer!" as a slur (see Dörle/Antini/Stingl 2007).

Upon discussion Dörle, Antini and I came to the conclusion that there are links between both accounts I have just given that need to be explored. For they may be symptoms of processes on a much deeper level which we can currently only suspect and of which I will not talk of specifically today. But these nonetheless symptons point towards a troublesome development that as academics we are required to keep an eye out for. Hence this presentation today.

Let me first explicate the semantic change in German "vocabulary":

The German word "Opfer" contains two dimensions that in English is covered by the words: "Victim" and "Sacrifice". In other terms, "Opfer" has both, a sacred and a profane dimension that in English for example does not exist. As I am not an etymologist the "word-evolution" is of lesser importance to me. I wish to review its social effects as a semantic available for the construction of (auto-)biographic narratives for both individuals as well as societies themselves (Luhmann-Language: "self-descriptions").

Expanding on Bruce Malina's (2000) depiction, Birgit Dörle, Lazarino Antini and myself view the transformational process of the "Opfer"-Semantic following an inclusive path of evolution ("inclusive" meaning that the prior dimensions are not simply lost, but can even be still covered. Sometimes fragmented thru different groupings in a society):

1. The sacred dimension: The „Opfer" as a Sacrifice in a ritualistic context
2. „Opfer" and Causation: Victim
   a. „Opfer" as Victim of a catastrophy
      i. Intermediate Category: Esoteric Cause (Animistic Nature or Nature as a tool of capricious deity)

   ii. Natural Catastrophes (scientifically explained, though uncontrollable cause)

   iii. Human failure (Victimization as a corollary of action or human action could have prevented the cause)

3. „Opfer" in the Victim and Culprit/Villain Narrative
4. An intermediate Category: The profane Sacrifice: Sacrificing oneself in a worldly cause for others
5. Victim and Survival
 a. Victim and Bereaved
 b. Victim <u>and</u> *Survivor*
 c. Victim <u>or</u> *Survivor*

This classification is certainly guides the "ephemeral" and provisional result of our reflections so far.

It strangely mirrors a classificatory which is both simpler, yet contentually a richer depiction of transformatory development of the Holocaust representation in the media, as found described by Natan Sznaider and Daniel Levy (2001) in light of the conditions of "Reflexive Modernity" and the "Musealization and Virtualization of History" (see also Bal 2006; Beier-deHaan 2005).

Sznaider/Levy claim a "reflexive change" has taken place in temporal phases that went from the constitution of the Holocaust by name-giving from a commemorable event to its musealization. This was a process that can analytically be described in four phases:

1. Postwar Decade
2. Emergence of „Holocaust-Awareness" (1960s/70s)
3. Commemorative „Flood" of Events (1980s)
4. Cosmopoliticalization (late 1990s and forward)

Most distinctively is the role that mass media have played in the transformation of the semantics entailed, beginning with Anne Frank's diaries and the Eichmann trials towards Schindler's list, there is a shift of focus detectable from

1. Not speaking about it
2. Speaking about the victims
3. Speaking about the victims and the culprits
4. Speaking about the "Survivors"

This change cannot only be described in the terms of Reflexive Modernization but in Systems-Theory's Luhmann-Language too, by viewing it thru the lens of Elena Esposito. The past has become "re-defined", while the future is fixed. This is the fate of "ultra-differentiated" societies whose system's memory has reached the state of "procedural memory".

But therein lies another dangerous twist. Just as – in Esposito's example – a search engine produces list-memories of things that have never been thought, the use of narratives formed by semantics becomes to some degree arbitrary. Cynically said: We're all "Survivors" now.

So this is one case where historical accounts are being redefined in the context of collective memory. The selection process of remembering hinges on what is forgotten to a most substantial degree. And even current or recent disputes about how a monument of the Holocaust victims is to be called is being engulfed in a process of reiteration from the context of the future. Remember the dispute whether Sinti&Roma is an adequate description of the group of "gypsy-tribes" the Nazis had almost annihilated. The spatial and temporal grounds for the dispute rooted in the institutional structures existent and their future programs and agendas already set, and less on the past. The same goes for the establishment of a "Zentrum für Vertriebene" in the German discourse. But those remembered in such a form of dispute and within such agendas that do have an effect on what is "collectively memorized" are those that *survived* however much suffering, less so those who died. Those that are left to remember become the *survivors*, automatically so. Even if they were not even present or born at the time of the actual "historic" event.

And that aspect becomes ever more prevalent even in the "nation of culprits" (Nation der Täter). The Germans more and more have abandoned the process that led from "ignorance" right after the war, the "guilty conscience"-narrative that succeeded it and the subsequent "Liberation-"narrative, where they depicted themselves victims of the trickery of the Nazi-propaganda.

Instead they have adopted a Survivor-Narrative. The same survival dimension is claimed for the bombing-survivors of Dresden now as there is for the survivors of the London bombing nights. A recent article in one of Germany 's largest weekly Boulevard Journal, addressing the "moral downfall" of a once popular news-anchor, made the claim that a quarter of the German population believes that "not everything

the Nazis" did was bad". Those who have politically argued for the German people coming to terms with a kind of "normalcy" surely had something else in mind, but herein we can suspect a symptom of transformatory processes.

Our suspicion lies in the idea that transformations in mass-media content are the prime mover here which would correlate with the education level of the subjects in question.

So why the pejorative use of "Opfer", when my point seems to be about "Survivor"? The "Survivor" is the other side of "Opfer". Marking another "Opfer", a person wants to distinguish his/herself and define themselves in terms of *Survivor*. The route from the highly popular so-called Jungle-Shows on the telly to the common proverb of "surviving in the jungle of paragraphs" is easily drawn. And German Social-Welfare recipients who wrestled extra-cash from the state have brave tales to tell, as Dörle, Antini and I have repeatedly observed. But there lies the actual point: The stories have changed from an account that said "I have a legal claim to make" to accounts that say "I have a claim that I fight for".

Watch a school soccer game today. You will find the parents arguing not over the results of a competition, but way into after the game. You will find people acting as id they had an initial claim to victory, as if the outcome was certain. Loosing was thus a matter not of a "loosing/winning a game"-narrative, but there just "must have been other matters at play". One was victim of fraud, thus this cannot be accepted, *survival* is thus achieved by protesting during or after the game. The sneaking acceptance of drug use in professional sports is testament to that. What has changed here is not that using drugs to enhance performance is considered wrong by itself, the point is just "you got caught".

And there is what you could call a difference in social strata/class or milieu. The higher the level of education, so have we derived from observation, the more likely a person is to apply the victim-perpetrator/villain narrative and see claims made against another party in the name of justice. The lower the educational level, the more likely the use of the survivor narrative. Thus for everyday life and biographical accounts people –in our perspective – acquire from the narrative stock of semantics available to them. In accordance with the shift in the semantic stock as observable in the Holocaust discourse via the transformation of mass media content there has been a

new prevalence in the "Opfer"-*Survivor*-Narrative over the Victim-Justice-Narrative. This we find in Germany, as well as in other countries.

In Germany, people with very low level education will make use of the "Opfer-"semantic in a pejorative fashion to distinguish themselves positively as a *Survivor*. While those with a higher level in education will more likely apply narratives of justice and legality in processing reiterative biographical accounts and cope with situations of risk and insecurity (see also: Zinn 2006).

We have observed the application of the narrative in another context, namely a case of dissociate or multiple personality disorder. As Ursula Link-Heer (1999) has shown such fragmentation of personality as effected by traumatic experience follows narrative structures that are culturally and historically relative. A specific case observed by Dörle, follows exactly along the narrative path of "Opfer"/*Survivor*, splitting the person in question into exactly these two types, which we can claim – following Link-Heer's account – would historically still be a fairly new narrative type. We do not wish to say there is a necessary causality at play or it can be without doubt be proven to always be the case. But it would make sense to pursue this further. If it is correct that biographical accounts draw from a collective semantic stock of narratives, if it is correct that fragmented personalities are arranged within such limited frames and if it is correct that mass-media do play an important part in changing (ever faster) the stock, than we would expect to see this reflected in personality disorders. The single current case we have been able to observe is not "statistically representative", but then first such cases are not as common, secondly they too would represent only another symptom of the underlying process.

What is worrisome, and why it deserves mention in a forum such as the present, is what I should now shortly explain.

It has in recent years become quite customary to present "results", specifically statistically verified results at conferences and in journal articles. But at the same time conferences *should* function as exchange of ideas that are yet unfinished, as well as alerting researchers and intellectuals to current processes that are happening "under the rug" and that deserve a concerted effort to fully uncover. Particularly if they might be processes that entail dangers to society. We live in a time where social cohesion becomes an issue, we may face the state of *anomie* in our society in the near future. Let's not kid ourselves here, the signs are on the walls, everywhere. The emergence of the *Survivor*-Narrative is tied deeply into these developments, so is its "other side". Individualistic opportunism is the most common *ethos* and it interpenetrates with images portrayed in the mass-media. What do we have to set

against it? And should we set something against it? The latter question I will answer in this fashion: Think of the consequences.

The first question is an appeal to Civic Virtue, it was once common among academics and intellectuals. And forgive me for sticking with an ideal. This presentation results from a series of observations and reflections a group of people including me have made and talked about. I have tried to give a condensed version of these refelctions here. It is less so a presentation of "data" than of developments we have observed, debated and found troubling enough that they deserve a more public attention and increased observation. We will continue this and ask you to join us therein. Because the moment we may have "statistic data", events may have already overrun us. As European Citizens and Academics we should not allow this.

I do thank you for your attention.

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