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A SOCIOLOGICAL COMMENT ON KANT'S CONCEPT OF MATURITY IN THE CONTEXT OF PAST HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

This brief essay emphasizes the need for scholarly debate on the legacy of Kant's ideas of maturity and on social approaches to past human rights violations. In light of arguments presented here, there are strong links between these two issues, as well as important mutual contributions. Kant's ideas on maturity make one think that reckoning past human rights violations is an important component of large-scale social enlightenment and is a process of social maturation. On the other hand, debates and analyses of social approaches to the past demonstrate that social values and emotions play an important role in this mostly cognitive process. In fact, purely cognitive enlightenment is neither possible nor sufficient when looking the most difficult facts square in the face. The very decision to review the past, as well as the decision to avoid difficult issues, is linked with fundamental values and with strong popular emotions. The experiences of post-totalitarian and post-dictatorial societies can make a contribution to the development of fundamental concepts.

“To look one's own history in the face is as much an obligation for nations as it is for individuals. Amnesia is a tragedy; self-imposed amnesia is a serious offense.”

Jacques Le Goff, *Geschichte und Gedächtnis* (1992)

“The singular, explosive, incalculable political power of living within the truth resides in the fact that living openly within the truth has an ally, invisible to be sure, but omnipresent: this hidden sphere of authentic existence. It is from this sphere that life lived openly in the truth grows; it is to this sphere that it speaks and in it that it finds understanding. This is where the potential for communication exists... Living within the truth is humanity's revolt against an enforced position, is... an attempt to regain control over one's own sense of responsibility.”

Vaclav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless* (1985)

1. These quotes – from a historian and a dissident-turned-president, respectively – point to a long tradition in European intellectual history, to the Enlightenment. It represents, in Immanuel Kant's words, "... the exit of man from self-incurred immaturity" (1961/1784) and consists in the obligation of looking history in the face and taking responsibility for it. The twentieth century added new and dramatic dimensions to Kant's idea. Thus, these two quotes point to the dramatic experiences of modern societies, to gross human rights violations, and to the obligation of looking victims and perpetrators who are living among us in the face. The authors of these passages entreat us to explore the truth about the past as a condition of authentic communication in our modern democratic society. They warn us against the temptation to forget history, to silence it, to relegate it to archives, and limit it to scholarly investigations, or, at best, to discuss it in narrow circles of experts. Reckoning the past and learning the truth about it could expose the 'other', who is also 'us'. It could challenge our identity and self-definition as 'victims' and 'virtuous heroes', and not perpetrators or collaborators, and certainly not cowards. Thus, learning the truth could be a healing experience; it could reveal a deep and consciously concealed evil. It potentially represents a moment of courageous enlightenment, of large-scale social education in the process of communication about crimes that have been committed. On the other hand, concealing the past and silencing uncomfortable voices enables us to protect feelings of innocence and at the same time reveals intellectual or emotional immaturity.

Although the "exit from immaturity" through independent and free communication about crimes committed in the past is possible, it might be very difficult. It depends on the mundane experiences of ordinary citizens and the everyday rules of social communication, on deeply-rooted, residual structures of thinking about justice, crime, guilt, and punishment, not to mention the power relations and vested interests of those who would prefer to remain hidden and silence the past. Because the truth about the past is very much wrapped up with everyday definitions of situation and with the experiences of ordinary people – for instance, in the form of the long-term and close coexistence of victims and perpetrators. It is at the same time a truth about everyday opportunism, cowardice, the toleration of human rights abuses, or, on the contrary, about the civil courage of ordinary people, those unsung heroes of world history. And so, public debate about past human rights violations and the ways in which people "come to terms" with them reflects the varying experiences of victims and their families, of perpetrators, collaborators, and instigators, of simple cowards, as well as of techniques for justifying and legitimizing past wrongs, because they justify the behavior of those persons. We are dealing here with a complex truth that emerges from the investigation of these diverse experiences. When facing their difficult pasts, post-totalitarian societies find new ways of avoiding difficult truths, of blurring the line between victims and perpetrators living in the same society, of protecting their immaturity, or, on the contrary, they undertake efforts to learn about the everyday courageous acts of ordinary people and be-

come able to demythologize their public consciousness. Therefore, social reckoning of the past in the form of public debate and the institutionalization of the search for truth represents, to use an apt formulation of Zygmunt Bauman, "a moral moment" in the lives of contemporary pluralistic and complex societies that stirs public consciousness and makes people think in terms of good and evil (Bauman, 1988). However, the public education in an enlightened debate and the formation of the moral ability to think in such terms encounter new barriers or impediments that make it possible to avoid difficult issues and to remain cognitively and emotionally immature.

In this brief presentation devoted to the legacy of Kant's ideas about maturity, after briefly outlining the debate on maturity as intellectual and emotional emancipation, and indeed as a process of learning how to live within the truth after the everyday experiences of totalitarianism, I will briefly describe the interests and arguments of the social sciences in the debate on reckoning past human rights violations. Finally, I will present, in an ideal-typical way, three main features of modern societies, especially of modern post-dictatorial and post-totalitarian societies, life-worlds which, in the light of my hypothesis, influence approaches toward the past and are responsible for the absence of popular interest in critical debate about it.

2. There are several questions about the concepts of emancipation and maturity, as well as several important propositions that concern the reading of Kant's notion of emancipation with respect to gross human rights violations and the truth about them. Both the concepts of maturity and emancipation with regard to an individual within a social system and the characteristics of the social system were used by Kant's interpreters, especially by Critical Theory representatives.

First and most commonly, Kant was read as having pointed toward the end of the immaturity that was brought about by the democratic revolution, at least as a matter of principle, but also because of its quite practical characteristics. Thus, somewhat obviously, democracy not only brings self-governance and therefore requires self-responsibility in citizens, but it also opens new areas of discourse and deliberation on topics that were excluded from public discourse by oppressive regimes before democratization started. Democratization, therefore, at least in principle supports the reckoning of past atrocities by the new democratic societies. One can cite here many examples from different regions of the world that corroborate this proposition, from German debates and reckoning of the Nazi past, to Polish debates on the atrocious events during World War II and after it, concealed until the democratic break-through of 1989. In Poland such issues, initially silenced and then debated after democratization, include the killing of Jews by their neighbors, mass-scale resettlements of ethnic minorities by the communist authorities, the nationalization of private property that took the form of looting and plundering "class enemies". In other parts of the world, democratization brought about the disclosure of atrocities committed by military regimes in Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, El Salvador, Honduras, and of the operation and organization of apartheid in South Africa. In all of these countries their

societies were faced with the horrors of oppressive regimes and started to publicly debate mass human rights violations as part and parcel of the democratization process. However, as I will try to demonstrate, the relationship between democracy, maturity, and emancipation with respect to past gross human rights violations is not easy or simple.

The second reading presents the later Marxist critique of Kant's view. It was also strongly supported and elaborated by the first generation of Critical Theory proponents, i.e., the first generation of representatives of the Frankfurt School. It was this critique that suggested that, in the way it occurs, the advent of political modernity, the *bourgeois* revolution, had resulted in an illusion, in a false emancipation that brought about a new kind of immaturity and serfdom. In the light of this reading of the emancipation proposition, in order to reach a state of maturity one would have to move from political emancipation to human emancipation understood as emancipation from capitalism. According to this interpretation, not only are horrors committed because of capitalism, but public debate about them is impossible unless societies are emancipated from capitalism. This is not a reading that is of particular relevance to this paper or to the issues of reckoning the truth about the past in the contemporary world, and so it is only briefly mentioned here. As we now know, emancipation from capitalism brings neither human emancipation nor maturity, and even less public debate about horrors. However, such a reading suggests other important theoretical propositions that concern the technocratic "system" of modern society, capitalist or not. It is described by Vaclav Havel as an impersonal system that makes marionettes of its functionaries and "ritual flunkies" of citizens who shout slogans without considering their meaning, who thoughtlessly conform to systemic requirements, and who avoid asking difficult questions (Vaclav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, cited above, p. 34). Such a system, thanks to its technocratic structures on the one hand, and to rituals on the other, penetrates all spheres of social life. It deprives people of their individual responsibility and therefore keeps them in a state of immaturity. This line of reasoning, characteristic also of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, results in the argument about the rise of totalitarianism in "administering an administered society", and in the conception of the "escape from freedom", both referred to by Theodore Adorno. Above all, however, this line of argumentation – with respect to the public sphere and social life-worlds – was fully developed by Jürgen Habermas in his works on the systematic distortion of both the life-worlds and the public sphere, and on the emerging "new untransparency" that resulted from the elimination of social conflict, characteristic of late capitalism and the modern welfare state (Habermas, 1986, p. 23). With regard to these new developments, Habermas formulated his theory on the emancipatory potential of free, unconstrained communication, both on the individual as well as on the public level (Habermas, 1981). For a debate on the reckoning of the past and the protection of the right to truth, Habermas's theory provides a model of critical analysis, and a normative model of transformation: one can compare the existing phenomena and institutional

arrangements with the model of free and unconstrained communication in order to explain distortions and to postulate the direction of change.

3. There are also several important hypothetical supplements to an argument on the emancipatory potential of free, unconstrained communication about gross human rights violation. The first of them could be summarized in the proposition that maturity, and above all emancipation, represents no definite point in history, but consists in a constant process of learning. This supplement is based on Michael Foucault's famous criticism of the Kantian concept of Enlightenment. Apart from this author's contribution to the concept of power and his conceptualization of the 'power-chain' that exists – because of unequal knowledge and also perhaps because of rhetorical skills – even in the simplest communicative relationship, Foucault's interpretation of Kant in his famous essay places emphasis on the word 'exit'. If the Enlightenment is an exit from self-incurred immaturity, then it is neither an antecedent nor a subsequent state; it is an intermediate state, the moment of leaving (Foucault, 1986, p. 48). Thus, there is no accomplished new phase or state, one of emancipation, after leaving immaturity, exiting from it, just as there is no prescribed state of maturity. Emancipation is rather an ongoing demand, an exigency; in Foucault's proposition, it is an ethos that consists in exiting, "opting out", leaving the status quo in the constant, disinterested, purposeless, and autothelic development of one's authenticity. There is no place in this short paper for a critical debate on this conceptualization of exit and authenticity, but one certainly may add that reckoning past atrocities gives a direction to such an 'exit' from existing truths. We at least know what to avoid and we can repeat the slogan "never again", knowing exactly what it is that cannot be repeated: 'Auschwitz' and the 'gulags'.

The second supplement concerns the notion of transparency and propositions that concern the universally valid results of reasoning or, in this case, propositions and postulates on the universally valid results of unconstrained and free communication. As we already know, debates about past human rights violations reveal local experiences and perspectives; above all, however, they reveal social memories which it is not always possible to translate into the perspectives of others, especially of those who do not possess those memories. Therefore, the process of emancipation based on the reckoning of past human rights violations is locally embedded. Moreover, it is based on truths and interpretations of facts that do not always have universal validity: they can be partial, subjective, and incomplete. These truths are not entirely transparent, they are neither the result of scientific experiments, nor are they subordinated to the rules of formal logic. They are expressed not only for the sake of the truth, but are somehow related to their consequences, and in this they have a performative function. They are social, political and legal truths that are based on some rules regulating input, and, as was stressed above, they remain in a performative relationship with their outputs. Moreover, they could lead to self-assessment, shame, and feelings of guilt on the part of the individual, and to political compromise, reconciliation, and the rule of law, punishment for crimes, and reparations on the part of the political system.

The third supplement concerns also our memory of past events. It is obvious that no one of us could survive with the memory of all that we might have remembered. This would mean an overload. If we do register something, we remember only a fragment. It is also obvious that we are highly selective in what we see, in what we store, in what we recall, and in how we recall it. What is a heroic act for an underground opposition member could be a disturbance or a nuisance to those who prefer to live in peace. We perceive selectively, we remember selectively, and we recall selectively. We construct, but above all we interpret.

With respect to truths based on memory, the following recollection of a prominent Norwegian criminologist illustrates the above trivialities.

“I was a child in an occupied country during World War II, writes Niels Christie. I did the usual things. (...) Nevertheless, I cannot remember anything about the time that the Jews were deported; I cannot remember one single comment about it in my generally patriotic circles. The Jews were apprehended by the ordinary Norwegian police. Since they were so many and yet so few, one hundred ordinary taxis were used to transport them to the ship that brought them to Germany. I suppose the drivers soon forgot this episode in their lives. When the few survivors came home from the camps, they came to a country that to some extent had forgotten that they had ever been there. And their property was mostly gone. It was not until 1996 that they – or mostly their children and grandchildren – get a decent compensation” (Christie, 2003, p. 338).

One can quote similar Polish acknowledgments, both of ordinary people and of intellectuals, not only about the Holocaust, but also about events after World War II, for instance about the displacement of whole ethnic minorities and the confiscation of their property (i.e., its nationalization and immediate selling out for nearly nothing to new owners). One can hear the denials of those events, the accusations of the displaced people of being enemies of the Polish nation, in accord with the line of the official communist propaganda, but one can also trace some feelings of guilt and shame (Skąpska, 2005, p. 219).

Such examples clearly illustrate that social truths, especially if they concern the past and are based on memory, are complex and unclear: they are either founded on fragmentary information about indisputable facts that can be proved, or they consist mostly of interpretations of those facts. These interpretations are linked with the place in society, with particular perspectives and definitions of situations, with particular experiences of ordinary people, and with social memories that are incomplete and selective. Moreover, social truths are based on social beliefs, and if they refer to atrocities, to human rights violations, they are entangled with strong emotions and traumas. Therefore, they are not value-neutral. Various such social truths can be illustrated in a series of statements that concern indisputable facts. This is documented in an analysis of Polish Parliamentary debates on the possible regulations concerning the “lustration”, the screening of the past, and decommunization, the banning of former communist from some official functions. That analysis revealed many conflicting truths about the political past of one and the same society (Łoś, 1995, p. 192).

One can quote many such examples of various truths, presented by victims and perpetrators. My own experience in the Polish court was with victims – two elderly ladies and one elderly man, all three former members of the Polish underground army fighting against the Nazis during World War II, denounced as western spies by the new communist authorities, put in prison, and severely tortured. Their perpetrator, Adam Humer, also of advanced age at the time of the trial, treated the victims – witnesses in his trial – with the utmost scorn and contempt. He did not question the facts and he remembered very well his own power over his victims, and their weakness. Perhaps he also remembered other cases in which victims who could not withstand tortures broke down and promised to collaborate with the communist secret police. He felt entirely justified by the ideology of class struggle; for him all three present in that trial and other victims of his were representatives of the enemy – western capitalism or ‘imperialism’ – as he constantly repeated. He, on the other hand, defended “social justice”.

Perpetrators of this type see themselves as servants of the state, most often of national states surrounded by aggressors. Or they are just functionaries, as Eichmann in his office. Or they see themselves as soldiers in an inevitable and just war. Their trials do not change their self-assessment, but at least they inevitably lead to public education, public debate about the revealed facts, and more importantly, they contribute to a new interpretation of those facts.

Thus, as this short argument illustrates, social truths – meaningful interpretations of facts – are based on particular beliefs, and these beliefs in turn reflect the social knowledge and position of their holders within the social space. On the input side, the truths are based on beliefs and convictions, however incomplete, unclear, stereotypical, or ideological. On the output side, they are linked with desired consequences. Moreover, according to the psychological concept of social truths, on the output side they are also connected with emotions of self-assessment, which include pride as well as guilt and shame. Therefore, social truths are not only fragmentary and complex, multidimensional and contextualized, but, because of the emotions they provoke, they are also ‘rich’ and in a way ‘hot’ (Taylor, 1985, p. 35). As such, they are very far from the Kantian results of pure reasoning. They are expressed in ordinary, colloquial language, and by referring to such notions as guilt, crime, punishment, genocide, and reconciliation, they strongly appeal to cultural and even religious stereotypes and archetypes (Skąpska, 2002, p. 208).

The challenge to social truths, for instance in the form of information about atrocities, does not impair the authority of the facts to which these truths refer. It is rather an encompassing challenge to popular definitions of situations, as well as to emotions on which self-assessment is based: such a challenge could support pride, but it could also result in shame and provoke feelings of guilt. Hence the transformative potential of truths about past human rights violations. They make one reconsider the beliefs on which self-esteem is based, they might provoke shame and perhaps also feelings of guilt, and in any case they lead to

a redefinition of the situation, they result in a 'change of perspective'. Therefore, the truth about past atrocities made public, debated, and eventually put on trial functions as a catalyst and as an important moral impulse for a society to rethink the beliefs on which its self-assessment is based.

The second and the third supplements also point to the argument that there are important extra-cognitive aspects of free democratic communication about past atrocities. The aforementioned sense of responsibility for the future, the will to avoid gulags and Auschwitz, and the deep democratic conviction to protect the dignity of victims and involve them in public communication.

Thus, although social truths are complex, fragmentary, and sometimes entangled in various conflicting interpretations, debate about them reveals unknown facts and the even unthinkable interpretations, which might eventually lead to emancipation and contribute to maturity: a complex process in the focus of many social science interests.

4. Social psychologists apply the concepts of maturity and emancipation to human cognitive and emotional development. Among other things, maturity consists of an ability to question, to deliberate about existing truths, to emancipate oneself from truths that cannot be accounted for, and also, to evaluate critically social relations and institutions that are rooted in lies. It also consists in the development of a self that is not only intellectually or cognitively autonomous, but also emotionally autonomous, and in the ability to develop feelings such as guilt, shame, and compassion (Kohlberg, Levine, Hewer, 1983, p. 23 ff.). The concept of maturity is also applied to the characteristics of social conditions that promote or impede individual cognitive and ethical development. In this regard, debate about past human rights violations has a transformative and even an emancipatory potential for individuals and collectivities: it can shatter taboos and pull back the curtain on stereotypical thinking and collective hypocrisies. For the society at large it presents an opportunity for a large-scale learning process regarding its authentic identity; it is linked with people's ability to adopt a critical stance toward themselves and their institutions. Since critical self-evaluation can be a humbling and humiliating experience that results in feelings of guilt and shame, a great deal of civil courage is demanded of societies undergoing this painful process. This process, however, is essential to the development of both social sciences that have been twisted by oppressive ideologies, and of social scientists who were implicated in them.

With regard to maturity and emancipation, social scientists are interested in the relations between the victims, perpetrators, and instigators, in techniques of silencing the truth, i.e., of distorting social communication, and in the social and political effects of unimpeded communication about past atrocities. In their view, if societies cherish their self-image at the cost of truth, critical voices are silenced, their authors ridiculed, or at best marginalized, and the social order is legitimized by myths that support a social structure in which there is no place for victims. As the author above quoted observes:

“Silence is one of the answers to atrocities. Silence, because there is nobody around to listen. Therefore isolation of the victims is one of the major features in social systems when illegitimate violence is applied. There is nobody to tell, and there is no end to attempts by oppressors to silence their victims. Nor is there an end to the continuous struggle to break the silence” (Christie, *ibidem*, p. 339).

There are several ways of silencing societies and keeping them in immaturity. It might happen that the victim's intellectual need for an explanation is eventually directed toward his or her own deficiencies and silences the protests. In her essay about the gulags, Anne Applebaum describes the extraordinary silence of the victims of Soviet terror and the phenomenon of shunning persons who returned home from the Soviet camps by their professional colleagues, friends, and even families. Because the Soviet elite had never quite admitted the wrongdoings, prior to the glasnost reform of the 1980s, victims were not allowed even to discuss what had happened to them in public. In her words “...silence was mandatory and repression (of these persons – G.S.) obligatory” (Applebaum, 2002, p. 18; see also 2004). To change this, it is essential that the victim comes out of his or her isolation and gains access to an audience that will not reinforce the victimization, the definition of the situation imposed by the oppressors. Hence the silencing and concealment of the truth about past atrocities represents not only an important psychological strategy, but also a social and political strategy. The truth about the past could devastate not only individuals but also social and national self-conceptions, and national ideologies and myths. The silencing of past atrocities can also be an object of vested political interests. Reports about past gross human rights violations and publicized trials of perpetrators and instigators shatter such myths and ideologies and reveal vested interests in past attempts at concealment. We are dealing here with events that potentially contribute to public debate and public education.

The concepts of maturity and emancipation in the context of past human rights violations reckoning are also debated by the political sciences, especially if they are interested in legitimizing the newly emerging power relations. As it was stressed, the experience of postcommunist societies in Central and Eastern Europe shows that the process of dealing with the past follows the rules of power and selectiveness (Reinprecht, 2002, p. 103). The legitimization of the new state of affairs is desired by policies that pertain to past public discourse, and a novel topography of collective memory is generated by new policies of symbolism. On one hand, this helps to construct, or to reconstruct, a collective identity, and, on the other, it legitimizes the newly constructed political and legal institutions that deal with the past, institutions of amnesty and forgetting, or of purifying, labeling, and remembering.

5. Finally, sociologists point to several phenomena that characterize the lifeworlds of late modern society that represent a striking ‘elective affinity’ to Habermas’s ‘new untransparency’ proposition, impeding any public debate on past atrocities, that help to avoid difficult topics, to avoid responsibility, not to mention feelings of guilt or shame. Such phenomena include consumerism, the

‘unbearable lightness of being’ of modern consumers, the specific forms of political correctness that promote conformity to the main stream of popular opinions, and the peculiar ideology of progressivism that imposes forgetting and is combined with a purely utilitarian understanding of politics that is based on a calculus of costs and benefits.

As it has been observed, the culture of consumerism consists in the elevation of private well-being and legitimizes the conscious concealment and silencing of a difficult past because of the present stage of prosperity, for instance under the motto “living well (economically – G.S.) is the best revenge” (Halmai, Scheppele, 1997, p. 155). It is based on the clear preference given to the stabilization of the economic situation, to a life without responsibility, and to the avoidance of the difficult topics of human rights violations or genocide in exchange for the present abundance of consumer goods.

Emancipation and maturity are badly served by those forms of political correctness that consist in the principle of not tackling uncomfortable subjects, not calling things by their real names, not calling the *status quo* into question, i.e., not challenging social cohesion based on the commonality of opinions. This leads to the silencing of uncomfortable voices, of all difficult truths that do not fit the main current and, in effect, to the exclusion of trouble-makers and their increasing pacification. Moreover, because of concerns with social cohesion and the unwillingness to underline points of disagreement, this new political correctness results in the denial of the deep divide between supporters and opponents of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes in the past, based on the highly unjust supposition that ‘all of us were smeared’ and profited from the former regime.

Imposed progressivism, ideologies based upon “forgetting about the difficult past for the sake of future”, and the ideologies of a ‘thick line’ dividing the past from the present, especially if they are combined with utilitarian reasoning about costs and benefits, eliminate important social experiences and their bearers, eliminate from the public realm those who have just grievances and the arguments of the victims of rights violations – prisoners of gulags and of detention camps, the experiences and arguments of families of disappeared persons – as if they had less weight than projects of future well-being. That form of progressivistic immaturity has two-fold consequences that are important for the transformation of post-totalitarian or post-dictatorial societies. First of all, it has political consequences that contribute to the aforementioned artificial blurring of differences between supporters of the regime and its opponents, and between perpetrators and their victims. Secondly, it results in a peculiar form of democracy that excludes voices and complaints of victims of the former regime.

However, there are contrasting sociological observations on phenomena characteristic of contemporary societies struggling to reckon with an atrocious past and to protect the dignity of the victims, thus contributing to the processes of emancipation and maturity, to the exit from consumerism, political correct-

ness, and blind progressivism. Thus, as it has been argued, governmental or international bodies have seldom divulged how gross human rights violations evolved and why, who was responsible for victimization, and what its scope was. This task has been mainly undertaken, with all its understandable limitations, by NGO's – such as Charter 77 in the former Czechoslovakia, or the “Memorial” organization in Russia, or the Committee for Defense of Workers that existed 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” (Bassiouni, 1996, p. 11). This list should also include churches and civil organizations connected with them, which strongly contributed to reverse the policy of concealment.

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