

Memorials, remembrance services, public and private ceremonies for the dead and the lost. This year **Stephan Feuchtwang** began a four-year study into how people grieve and, in different ways, express their extraordinary and catastrophic loss.

# Grievous loss

Events that destroy or dislocate people and their props of memory create shared loss. Some are remembered and turned into a past. Others can become a grievance. What shapes the way people – and nations – remember their losses publicly and transmit this to others?

The twentieth was a century of atrocity, as well as one in which the recognition of human rights became a real political and international issue. Auschwitz has become the best known symbol of ultimate loss, the attempted annihilation of a whole people. It has become a paradigm of commemoration and compensation, and the death camp has itself become a museum. But how well does it deal with the mourning of those who were murdered there? And does the loud commemoration of some entail relative silence about the others – gypsies, homosexuals and Soviet soldiers? Is this because they cannot claim a national presence, such as Israel? When does transmission include a demand for recognition, and how is that demand satisfied?

The study I'm about to undertake at LSE combines a number of disciplines, chief among which is anthropology, into a framework of interpretation. From anthropology I have taken the notion of bad death. Every culture includes an 'ideal' of a good death and also ideas of ghosts, of the unhappy dead, of dying badly. Rituals for dealing with the latter, and of converting bad into good death are part and parcel of standard mourning rituals. But when an event of unprecedented fatality occurs, rituals of mourning, transcendence and commemoration have to be adapted or new ones invented. So one focus of the research will be on such inventions of ritual and commemoration. To these we add the architectural and sculptural inventions for representing great loss and suffering. And further to them, we add the way the loss becomes standardised in school histories, and mass media. Of course this can be a way of anaesthetising (making good), forgetting, glorifying, or neglecting the event of great loss.

From psychoanalysis I take Freud's writings on mourning and melancholy and on trauma, and from cognitive psychology I take the results of research on recall. The highly ambivalent emotions of abandonment and the reconstruction by projection of an idealised place or object on one hand, and a demonised and humiliating force on the other, can be contained in myths or stories. Or else they are managed by splitting and recurrent acting out of the loss sustained. Triggers of recall, and construction of what cannot be recalled, feed into these images. So, another focus of the research will be upon the awkwardness, the silences and the repetitions in speaking (or not speaking) about shared loss.

From political history, sociology and moral philosophy I take theories of the nation and the state and of the way history and justice have been formed by the institutions of national sovereignty. In a lecture on what a nation is, Ernest Renan in 1882 famously observed that all nations are built on forgetting the brutality of their foundation and pre-history. I add that this continues after foundation and after the civil wars and the political, religious or ethnic cleansing that remakes nations. At the same time, what is marginalised and denied in the self-sustaining myths of nations is also the subject of appeals for recognition by courts or by religious figures that are expected to uphold human justice. So, a third lens of our research will focus on the institutions, including parties, international human rights organisations, legal organisations, and religious organisations, to whom pleas for apology, compensation and other forms of recognition are addressed.

The theoretical aim of the project is to test this framework for the interpretation of the relation between memorials and other means of transmitting catastrophic loss. When the silence of the unspeakable turns into the words of the next generation in a family, how is this affected by public words and silences?

The practical aim is to identify the conditions in which grievous loss becomes a grievance, a

movement, and a politics of victims. How often, in Ulster, or Cyprus, Israel or Bosnia have neighbours turned themselves into communities of exclusive victimhood that others cannot understand? Quite apart from the justice of a cause, is there a political culture of victimhood that is peculiarly strong in some countries and absent in others, where recognition is less righteous? When feud goes beyond conventional constraints, what kind of a politics can be found as a new constraint? We are not aiming for complete answers, but some answers to these questions should come from this project. The result should be of use to international agencies and consultants who deal with great, shared but personal loss.

The method of inquiry will be by fieldwork in places and with people who already know and trust the field-worker, important for such a sensitive topic. Fieldwork will be conducted in contrasting sites where I already have some experience: the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, Britain and Germany. As the designer of the project, I will be working with a fellow researcher resident in each country.

By 2006 we will know whether the focal themes of this research are equally applicable in the very different contexts in which we will apply them, and whether others are of greater importance. ■



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