

Dealing with the Past: Actualized History in the Social Construction of Reality

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Having been trained as both a sociologist and an anthropologist, I have in my research consistently been oriented toward the present. While carrying out fieldwork projects, however, I have often been confronted by opinions, questions, answers, convictions, reasoning, reflections and by concrete forms of social behavior that cannot be untangled and articulated exclusively in terms of the here and now. It would be all too easy to develop a tendency to underestimate the past by viewing it as a dead hand upon the present, rather than an active, operating force. There is, however, more to the presentist orientation in social research than that because this orientation is an expression of the epistemological and methodological bipolarism that has divided the social sciences and historiography for almost two centuries.

It is well known that the relationship between historical research and social sciences has virtually up to the present day been characterized by a reciprocal lack of recognition, if not outright antagonism. This has brought about a clear division of labor between history as a *science du passé* and the social sciences as *sciences du présent*. This was discussed very explicitly at the beginning of last century by a disciple of Durkheim, the sociologist Simiand. For him, the difference between history and social sciences did not consist merely in a different relationship to time; it was also based on a profound methodological distinction that Kant had acknowledged by contrasting the principles of homogeneity (*Homogenität*) and specification (*Spezifikation*) (Simiand 1903, Lévi-Strauss 1949: 363 ff., Cassirer 1985: 12). It was Simiand who insisted that the task of social sciences is comparison and generalization and that history should be based on the monographic method. From a comparable point of view in the opposite camp, the historian Croce was fond of contrasting the strong individualization of the historical method with the *pale abstractions* achieved through social analysis (Croce 1970: 298). This dichotomization has been taken over almost to the letter by anthropologists, especially if one thinks of the chief theoretician of British functionalism, Radcliffe-Brown, who borrowed the terminology of neo-Kantian philosopher Windelband in order to distinguish between nomothetic anthropology and idiographic history (Radcliffe-Brown 1976: 4 ff.).

Accordingly, one can plausibly maintain that ever since the nineteenth century there has been a progressive sectorization between history and social sciences, even on the part of those authors who have been least disposed to accept methodological straitjackets, such as the classics of the interpretive and phenomenological schools of thought, from Schütz to Berger and Luckmann. It is interesting to note that these social scientists attribute relatively little importance to the relationship between experience and history in their analyses of the *Lebenswelt* or the social construction of reality (Schütz and Luckmann 1979: 119 ff.; Berger and Luckmann 1979: 119 ff.). They too adopted a certain style of sectorization, which, in spite of recent attempts to abandon it, is still a very widespread *topos* and is often simply taken for granted. Were this not the case, Wallerstein's excellent book, *Unthinking Social Science* (1991), would not need to have been written. The clichés of methodological bipolarism that separate history and social sciences are still deeply rooted in both scientific communities and resistance to change is great. My impression, however, is that we social scientists are even further away than historians from a *paradigm change*, i.e. from accepting the historicization of social analysis.

Let me provide an example. When one speaks with social scientists – especially with sociologists – on the subject of clientelism and corruption in Italy or nationalism and ethnicity in Central-east Europe, the notion of historicity is employed to understand or explain these phenomena, yet with many ifs and buts. The questions that are posed during such debates have a similar tone and it is difficult to convey

the idea that Italy's present-day political culture or the current ethnic discourses in post-socialist societies are linked to precise historical experiences that have been lived by past generations and revisited, modified or even reinvented – sometimes intentionally – by present generations. Those who think in terms of the sectorization of social sciences often point to the most immediate and immanent causes, such as the characteristics of the Republican political system in Italy or the lack of material and ideological resources after the fall of socialism in Central-East Europe. The question is whether history is really necessary to understand the present situation or if looking for causes inherent in the system will suffice.

In spite of praiseworthy efforts to focus attention on the potential of historical anthropology in order to bridge disciplinary gaps, the interpretation of the present through the past is still an anomalous way of proceeding in social sciences, the practitioners of which remain convinced that the present can be decoded exclusively in its own terms.

1. THE HISTORY OF THE HISTORIAN AND THAT OF THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

As noted above, Wallerstein has spoken out against the sectorization that has plagued the human sciences since the nineteenth century. He has, furthermore, proposed a search for a new paradigm that transcends the divisions between social sciences and history and has made suggestions for their future unification (Wallerstein 1991). The somewhat unusual name he has given to his program is historical social sciences and it is worth pausing briefly to establish what this means. Reading Wallerstein with attention, I have become convinced that his goal is not to reduce history and social sciences to a kind of flattened average but rather to break down certain barriers that hinder a fruitful theoretical and methodological exchange. To include history in anthropology and vice versa is, therefore, the real aim of historical social science. If my impression is correct, then some of the conceptual peculiarities of the two parent disciplines would be maintained, but they would no longer be in direct opposition to one other; rather, they would be aspects of a more holistic interpretation of reality. The goal is not to create a monolithic conception of history but to call attention to the complementary aspects of the different points of view. There are probably some useful differences between the history of the historian and that of the anthropologist that should be examined independently of the iconoclastic impulses of those who would like to obliterate them. Considering these differences as a given, I shall now provide a brief characterization of each, with an emphasis on the anthropologist's view of history.

Even those historians who have repudiated what Braudel has called the *histoire événementielle* and have opted instead for the *histoire pensée* are primarily concerned with the reconstruction of past epochs, with processes in past socioeconomic cycles, or with long-term trends in daily life and in the collective consciousness. In all of these cases, real and actual time is of central importance. Braudel, in fact, perfectly pinpoints this aspect when he notes that even those historians who draw upon anthropological research – in the form of village studies, for example – must organize their approach, from beginning to end, in terms of a phenomenon which is mathematical, exogenous, thus external to the human being: namely, time (Braudel 1977: 77). Braudel's observation seems to me to be very significant, since it is verified by the practice of even those historians whose approach to determining dates is most similar to that of social scientists. We rarely find a lack of precise time references in books by historians or of those scholars who work with materials to which it is difficult to assign a reliable date – e.g. ancient and medieval history – and yet do not, for this reason, question the importance of accurate dates. This tendency is clearly evident also among historians who are not chained to the temporal course of events: for example, Le Roy Ladurie, Le Goff or Duby. To grasp the fundamental importance of time for historians, we need only read the titles and subtitles of their works, in which the time factor regularly appears, more or less explicitly.

The social scientist and, consequently, the anthropologist who takes the historical dimension of the subject being studied into consideration, is much less concerned with time. Time, although not of secondary importance, is much less concrete, much more endogenous, thus condensed in the individual viewed as a social actor. This specific conception of time is clearly linked to the anthropologist's view of history. As a field worker in the present, the anthropologist values the past especially as a force that conditions the present without mechanically determining it. I believe that the history of the anthropologist, therefore, is nearly always actualized history: a past that is more or less intentionally mobilized in the present. This actualization or mobilization of the past is usually carried out with specific aims in mind: finding ones' bearings in everyday life; signaling a sense of belonging

or identity; transmitting a symbolic or metaphorical message to other social actors; stabilizing relations of power or of social disparity; rebelling against conditions regarded as unacceptable etc.

Let us look at some examples. After seven hundred years of independence, Poland was partitioned and occupied by Prussia, Austria and Russia in three successive phases between 1772 and 1795. We know that the process of territorial division met with strong resistance in all parts of the country. This resistance culminated in the unsuccessful uprising led by Tadeusz Kościuszko (1794–95), which was bloodily repressed, due in large measure to the harsh intervention of the Russian troops led by General Suvorov. It is less well known that Kościuszko, with an army of enthusiastic but poorly armed peasants, managed to defeat the Russians at the Battle of Raclawice (April 4, 1794), which must be considered the most glorious moment of the uprising.

For the argument I want to make, it is important to remember that these peasants carried with them a banner embroidered with the words *Feed and Defend*. Almost two hundred years later, at the climax of the protest movement led by the trade union *Solidarność* – a few months before General Jaruzelski came to power (December 1981) and right at the moment when a Soviet invasion was feared – the rural wing of *Solidarność* organized a demonstration in Raclawice, during which the demonstrators appeared in historical costume – or at least in what they imagined to have been peasant garb at the end of the eighteenth century. And, as in the time of Kościuszko, the banner with the same motto appeared.

Now, as an anthropologist, I am interested in the real battle of Raclawice only insofar as it helps illuminate more recent developments. Almost 200 years after the historical event in question, the rural section of *Solidarność* acted with the aim of making the following point: the present-day farmers – the most integrated part of society and the part least contaminated by socialism – are ready, as were the peasants of that time, to *feed and defend* Poland in the case of intervention by the customary invader, i.e. the Russians.

If the anthropologist is primarily interested in actualized history, then the first questions to be posed are the following. How do specific social actors use past events in the present? In what way is history reinterpreted, manipulated and even reinvented? Which facts are chosen and which others discarded? What are the reasons for such choices? A moment's reflection shows that, in the case of actualized history the problem of time is less crucial, because the metaphors, metonyms and allegories it employs jump over the ages. Thus, the concrete time of history, as defined by Braudel, loses its real dimension and, in a certain way, wipes itself out.

Perhaps, then, the distinction between anthropological historiography and historical anthropology may be understood in terms of two different concepts of time, which have not yet been examined in depth. Below I analyze some aspects of this problem, with the aim of expanding upon the theme of actualized history as an anthropological field of research.

2. ACTUALIZED HISTORY AND FOUNDING MYTHS

The cohesion of every community is based, as Max Weber said, on *Gemeinsamkeitsglauben*, i.e. on the belief of having traits in common (M. Weber 1956: vol. 1, 235 ff.). Often, however, the traits in question are not seen by the members of the group as phenomena generated by the immediate present; on the contrary, the idea that the longer ago a common trait took shape, the more solid, unalterable and perpetual it is, seems to be much more widespread. This is why many identity managers in today's independent Lithuania are not against defining their people as the *dinosaurs of Europe*, since it emphasizes the grandeur and, even more significantly, the great age of their collectivity. History proves itself to be an enormous quarry from which one can extract those stones which show how, even then, the group constituted a unity. Naturally, the chosen facts are re-elaborated and often so cavalierly manipulated as to appear to outside observers as inventions.

Since the publication of the seminal work by Hobsbawm and Ranger, the term invention has had pejorative connotations and been linked to notions of falsehood or subterfuge (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1 ff.). For this very reason, Herzfeld (Herzfeld 1991: 12, 46, 205) rejects the concept of invention, noting that, judged by this standard, all history would have to be viewed as contaminated or falsified. To me, this seems comparable to the obsession of the Anglo-Saxon Puritans with the capital sin of lying. I would suggest there is nothing scandalous in the invention of stories and traditions. It may be, in fact, a necessary performance that nonetheless is based on events that actually occurred in a nebulous or legendary past. Insofar as it is linked to the *Gemeinsamkeitsglauben* of a community,

history must be continually re-examined and adapted to new situations. In this sense, actualized history is always also situational history. This becomes clear when one thinks of historical actors such as Jelačić in Croatia or the poet Ševčenko in Ukraine, who, in the course of this century, have frequently been denounced and rehabilitated.

Actualized history is not a faithful reconstruction of the past; rather, it always contains something invented. This is especially evident in the founding myths of a group, i.e. in those events that are believed to have given birth to the collectivity. Nowadays, almost all the communities that have come about as a result of a political pact – for example, the modern nation-states – derive their legitimacy, at least in part, from similar founding myths that are produced at certain moments and under particular circumstances thanks to the actualization of history.

An illuminating example is Switzerland, a country known abroad as a land without history. Until 1798, Switzerland was a quadrilingual, bi-denominational Confederation composed of city-states, peasant republics and colonized territories, which, for one reason or another, were nearly constantly in conflict with one another. Contrary to what is believed today, harmony and stability were not hallmarks of the first five centuries of this singular political community. In 1798, with the birth of the *United and Indivisible Helvetic Republic*, France made its first attempts to transform the old Confederation into a modern nation-state. But the real change came about only after the war of the so-called *Sonderbund* between catholic and protestant cantons (1847) and the drawing up of a new political pact – the federal constitution, approved in 1848. In this way Switzerland became a nation-state, which was, however, still in need of strengthening. This strengthening was achieved through the conscious, well thought-out invention of a founding myth: an actualization of history.

Wilhelm Tell was, in a very real sense, a nineteenth century hero who, up to 1848, may have been better known to foreign writers and composers such as Schiller and Rossini than to the Swiss themselves. But during this same period the Confederates' common fight for independence from the foreign domination of the Habsburgs was emphasized. The Habsburgs, paradoxically, came from a region that has always been on Swiss territory. The role of two or three little battles, almost skirmishes, between the Helvetians and the Imperial troops thus took on a disproportionate importance, while the micro-historical divisions and differences, which had frequently put the existence of the Confederation at risk before 1798, were ignored. In this way, the impression that Switzerland is a country with a harmonious past, free of the troubles of other nations, was created.

The most interesting phenomenon of this nineteenth-century construction of the Helvetic founding myth is undoubtedly the invention of the national holiday of the first of August, which, even now, is celebrated with a certain solemnity. This day commemorates the Rütli oath (1291), i.e. the pact of alliance between the three primitive cantons (*Urkantone*). This is believed to be the founding act of the Confederation. In fact, the character and date of this holiday were the result of a skillful decision made by desk-bound politicians. The Rütli oath was only one of several pacts of alliance that were drawn up in the Middle Ages within the territory of present-day Switzerland. Furthermore, it is neither the best documented nor the oldest. There were earlier alliances, which, had they been chosen, would have made the Confederation some fifty years older, with all the obvious consequences for past, present and future commemorations. But, from a territorial point of view, the Rütli oath is the most centrally located and, consequently, the one best suited to represent, metaphorically speaking, the heart of the nation. Its exact date is unknown, but reliable documents speak of *a day in August*. The choice of the first day of the month has its own rationale: the number one apparently has a certain charismatic aura; it symbolizes unity and perhaps excellence as well.

The case of Switzerland is particularly instructive, since it demonstrates the efficiency (Ricoeur 1985: vol. 3, 314) of the founding myths of a group, which in this case are the product of a deliberate actualization of history. In fact, the invention of founding myths and the skillful management of actualized history are vital components in the representation of the Helvetic community. Besides institutional mechanisms, which will not be discussed here but whose importance must be acknowledged, the invention of adequate founding myths is undoubtedly an essential component of the success of the *Swiss model*, which has been held up as an example for regions torn by violent ethnic conflicts (e.g., the cantonization project in Bosnia).

Thus, invention through the actualization of history may be seen as a necessary ingredient for the stability of a political pact, which cannot simply be reduced to a mystification of reality. One might

add that if in the Helvetic case it is a matter of invention, then three cheers for invention! For, whether or not the invention is true, it is certainly welcome.

3. MANAGING EXEMPLARINESS BY ACTUALIZING HISTORY: SAINTS, HEROES AND VICTIMS

A community in search of cohesion, thus also of a collective identity, will resort not only to the founding myths but also to the construction of exemplariness. In this case, too, one is almost always dealing with an updating of history, since, aside from various personality cults that were put into action by totalitarian systems in order to glorify the figure of a real leader and therefore are still active in the present, exemplariness as a complex of virtue to be admired and possibly to be imitated, is normally attributed to eminent characters from the past. Exemplariness is thus passed on by actualizing history.

It is clear that by looking particularly at the excellence of those who have marked or even shaped the past of a group, the community tends to underline their superiority in the present. In this case the construction of exemplariness becomes an essential element in a social group's fight for recognition.

What seems particularly interesting to me, however, is not so much the insistence on the inevitability or necessity of turning to the exemplariness in the collective practical identities as much as the underlying rationale of the different ways and specific reasons for the creation of virtuous characters in a given society.

I would like to premise that the fabrication of exemplariness is usually based on the sanctification or the heroization of people belonging to history. But the criteria needed to be declared saints or heroes varies greatly from group to group and this also holds true for what we can define as the European context. Accordingly, there are different ways of actualizing history and of conceiving exemplariness especially if we compare Western Europe to Central and Eastern Europe including the Balkans. One thing that strikes the Western traveller who visits the Russian or Balkan monasteries is the omnipresence of the images of the military saints, as for example that of St. George, St. Demetrius and St. Theodore (Delehay 1909). The repeated representations of war scenes such as battles and sieges also leap to the eye of the foreign observer. It is emblematic that in the Moldovița Monastery in the foothills of the Romanian Carpathians, not so far away from the present-day border with Ukraine, one can admire the frescoes of at least three military saints as well as a masterly representation of the seizing of Constantinople by the Ottoman armies.

This element leads us to believe that the construction of exemplariness in Central and Eastern Europe is based on a close relationship between ecclesiastical roles and acts of warfare. This is also shown by the architectonic structure of the old Russian monasteries which were true and proper fortresses for the defense of the national territory against the real or presumed threats from the East or the West. The famous Golden Ring, which was formed by a system of grand monasteries such as those of Sergijev Posad and Suzdal, is an incomparable military-ecclesiastical cordon intended to defend Moscow in case of Mongolian or Polish-Lithuanian invasions. On the western border of present-day Russia, stands a series of fortress-monasteries, such as the celebrated Trinity in Pskov, whose function in the past was to block the Swedish invasions and those of the Teutonic Knights.

This close relationship between ecclesiastical roles and military roles also evokes the problem of the link between saintliness and heroism, the latter being understood as a complex of warlike virtue. Without wanting either to create artificial differences between the East and the West of our continent or specific Russian or Balkan stereotypes, it seems evident to me that in Eastern Europe, far more frequently than in Western Europe, exemplariness, constructed in terms of saintliness, is still linked to the heroic quality, i.e. the military prowess of the historic characters in question.

There is no doubt that the epic Russian poems celebrating the memorable fights between the Bogatyrs of Kiev against those who threatened the integrity of the legendary Land of Rus, emphasize the heroic prowess of the protagonists amongst whom Ilya of Murom stands out. Although the latter was never sanctified, his warlike charisma is related to a miraculous recovery at the symbolic age of 33 and to his extraordinary sense of morality that made him carry out terrifying and cruel acts only when absolutely necessary, portending a latent and natural saintliness.

Looking, however, at other historical figures that have always been regarded as founding heroes of the Russian Motherland, one observes that they were de facto sanctified and have maintained their historic exemplariness to this day. In these cases of actualizing history there is a combination of saintliness, heroism and masculinity. In other words, in order to acquire the status of saint, it is

practically necessary to be primarily a heroic warrior. This is certainly not the only way of constructing saintliness in Russia but it represents an important possibility that has not yet lost its relevance.

In this sense the most symbolic case is undoubtedly that of Alexander Nevsky who is rarely seen as a saint by West Europeans but rather as an implacable and courageous warrior who in prohibitive conditions on a frozen lake, was able to defeat the powerful armada of the Teutonic Knights coming from the Baltic territories. On the contrary, in both the hegemonic discourses and the subaltern ones that developed after the fall of the Soviet Union, Alexander Nevsky is also and above all, Saint Alexander of the Neva – the man who fought heroically and successfully for the survival of his native land that was threatened by foreigners and to whom a famous and much frequented monastery in St. Petersburg is dedicated. Obviously analogous characters exist in Western Europe as well but it is symptomatic, for example, that El Cid, the Western hero most akin to Alexander Nevsky, has never been sanctified, while the saintliness of Joan of Arc has more to do with her martyrdom than her warlike virtues.

If we would now like to further bolster our observations on heroic, warlike and essentially masculine saintliness, we could cite the quite widespread tradition in Eastern Europe of bestowing the dignity of sainthood on many sovereigns distinguished for their military skill.

There are indeed Kings and Princes in Western Europe who achieved the dignity of sainthood. Here, however, aside from isolated exceptions in the Middle Ages, regal exemplariness that can lead to sainthood is constructed with other criteria to those mentioned so far.

The great French historian Marc Bloch in his masterly book on thaumaturgic kings teaches us that already in France, but also in England in the Middle Ages, the exemplariness of those sovereigns who, it is worth noting, were only very rarely sanctified was based on the supernatural abilities to carry out miracles by curing people affected by debilitating illnesses (M. Bloch 1983). The charisma of these powerful people was thus defined not so much by their military prowess as by their therapeutic ability. One is therefore dealing with a mystic or miraculous regality rather than a heroic one (M. Bloch 1983: 19 ff.). But let's return to Alexander Nevsky, who is viewed as a prototype of warlike, heroic and masculine sanctity, partly because this protagonist of Russian history wasn't actualized when communism fell in that country but was perfectly integrated in the Soviet pantheon as Sergei Eisenstein's film of 1938 clearly illustrates. This adoption can seem somewhat surprising at first in a declaredly atheist state even if Lenin in the famous decree of 1919 recommended that anti-religious activities were not to be overplayed to avoid offending the sensibilities of the masses who sought comfort in fanaticism. Certainly Alexander Nevsky was quietly de-consecrated but never in any radical manner. In fact, on the central panel of Pavel Dimitrievič Korin's famous triptych of 1942 he is purposely portrayed next to the banner of Christ. And this is because Stalin, at that time threatened by the German armies, played on the religious sensibilities of the Russian people in his mobilization for the patriotic war. In this way the Soviet dictator gave back to Alexander Nevsky, at least for the time being, his role of *homo religiosus* and saint. It does however seem obvious to me that the above-described virtues intrinsic to the exemplariness and saintliness of these characters eased their integration into Soviet mythology. It would have been more arduous for the communist power to confer exemplariness on one of the many saints devoted to merely religious activities, even if they were not always peaceful or marked by tolerance. It probably wasn't only their warlike or virile virtues that helped these protagonists reach the upper echelons of Soviet heroes, but also the fact that Alexander Nevsky was a victorious hero, i.e. a true hero such as those of the Russian fables analyzed by Vladimir Propp (Propp 1970) or those of the Nietzschean-Marxist project of people like Maxim Gorky or Anatolij Lunacarskij where there is no room for victims and anti-heroes are the representatives of an unsound principle (Günther 1993: 84 ff., 144 ff.).

The recurrent bringing up to date of historic characters by way of a winning exemplariness, be they saints or heroes, brings to mind the opposite case, i.e. a losing exemplariness

Tzvetan Todorov in his book *L'homme dépaysé* makes two interesting observations on this point.

The first is as follows:

“The collective memory usually prefers to keep two types of situations in the past of the community: those where we have had either victorious heroes or innocent victims” (Todorov 1996: 70 ff.).

And about the United States he adds:

“Politicians and actors have themselves understood that it is not enough to appear as victors but that they must be associated with the cause of victims. This is certainly one of the most fascinating changes which have taken place in the American mentality over recent years: the replacement of the heroic ideal with the ideal of the victim” (Todorov 1996: 216).

Obviously Todorov's assertions have a certain pertinence as, since the Vietnam war, there has been a veritable crisis of American heroism, in the United States so very well managed above all by Hollywood with its marines, deliverers of liberty and its sheriffs, guarantors of justice. But does the dichotomy between heroes and victims implicitly formulated by Todorov really have such a general validity as supposed by the author? If we think of the above-mentioned examples that belong mostly to the Russian world, it seems that Todorov is absolutely right. If we think of the Balkans, however, the situation is very different. In fact, it is surprising that Todorov proposed this polarity between the ideal of the hero and the ideal of the victim as he is originally from Bulgaria, a quintessential Balkan country where a strong dialectic if not an outright fusion between the two ideals can be observed. The construction of exemplariness in this country, as in the neighboring ones in truth, follows a specific dramaturgy according to which the hero or the saint, whether holy or layman, are at the same time innocent victims of an unbearable power that has imposed a secular *yoke*. The model of the Balkan hero-victim was personified by both the Bulgarian hero par excellence, Vasil Levski, an orthodox deacon at present in odor of sanctity, and Christo Botev, great patriotic poet and laical saint (who was particularly glorified by the socialist rhetoric), just because they both paid for their revolutionary prowess with the martyrdom perpetrated by the *Turkish occupiers*. But even all those ambiguous and partly anonymous characters, halfway between rebel and bandit, who inhabited the impassable mountains between Bulgaria and Macedonia at the beginning of this century, can be regarded as both heroes and victims. In fact, these men, who caught the imagination of the great reporter John Reed in his book *The War in Eastern Europe* (Reed 1916), fought against the residue of the Ottoman Empire in Europe losing, more often than not, their lives. One can suppose, with truthfulness, as the example of Jane Sandanski teaches us, that these warriors, feared but also esteemed for their cruelty, are in fact considered heroes just because they are victims.

Naturally there are many cases of winning exemplariness alongside this losing exemplariness. The most significant representatives are certainly the Albanian national heroes, the *Champion of Christ* George Kastrioti Skanderbeg and the Magyar-Romanian hero Hunyadi János/Joan de Hunedoara who in certain ways resembled Alexander Nevsky (Castellan 1991: 81 ff.). In spite of this very different pantheon of heroes and saints, in the Balkans losing exemplariness, personified above all by hero-victims, is an essential component of the national identity and of the consequent definition of us and them.

If now towards the end of this chapter one seeks an explanation for why on earth in Central and Eastern Europe, far more than in other parts of the continent, one comes across the construction of heroic, warlike and masculine saintliness, while in the Balkans losing exemplariness has such an incontestable fascination whether it be in the hegemonic classes or in the subaltern ones, one should avoid the allure of facile cultural arguments. By explaining culture through culture we are only contributing to the perpetuation of old stereotypes and prejudices: e.g. these are essential elements of an irrational world such as that of the Byzantine Russian Orthodox, where, as the Hungarians of Transylvania add with a certain disrespect, *the enlightenment, having never got past the Carpathians, has never arrived*. Somewhat more plausible than the cultural argument would seem to me to be the historic-anthropological argument, i.e. the assumption that actualizing history, as we shall see in a following chapter, is the result of a cognitive process based on the historic experience of a community. One could then rightly ask if heroic, warlike or masculine saintliness would not be better put in relation to the chronic instability of the borders in Central and Eastern Europe that, from time immemorial, have been defined and redefined. One would thus be dealing with a saintliness of border or more precisely, a political saintliness inherent to communities scourged by the variable geometry of their territories. Losing exemplariness based on the idea that the hero-victim binomial is inseparable, would then be an expression of the *vision of the defeated* (Wachtel 1977), i.e. of the vision of those who, after centuries of enduring oppression and perceived injustice, as shown by the example of the Balkan societies, consider themselves to be the *historically betrayed* (Giordano 1992). For this reason alone more in-depth historic-anthropological research should be initiated. And this, I feel, is only the

first area that needs to be covered more deeply in an anthropological-historical perspective that takes the strict relationship between present and past into account.

4. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE PAST AND THE REVERSIBILITY OF EVENTS: TWO ELEMENTARY FORMS OF ACTUALIZED HISTORY

Two common ways of actualizing history are the destruction of the past, i.e., the systematic elimination of facts, symbols and social practices linked to ages deemed barbaric, obscure or degenerate; and the reversibility of events, i.e., the project of getting back to how things were before, with the aim of overcoming a near past that has proven to be a fatal error.

The institutional elites of the countries of Central-East Europe seem, for example, to have used and to continue to use history as a formal and manipulative instrument of deceit. Perhaps such elites were, and are, also victims of their own illusions. As Matevjević has aptly stated, socialist regimes tried to move history and to push it forward with all means at their disposal - and this is true of all former Eastern bloc countries, from the GDR to Bulgaria, with a few exceptions and some deviations (Matevjević 1992: 38). The chief advocates of this endeavor did not shrink from the systematic destruction of the past, which was presented as the oppressive legacy of a corrupt and degenerate epoch of despotism, poverty, exploitation and alienation. In this regard, it is instructive to see how the Bulgarian rulers dealt with land registration after the agrarian reforms of 1946. Driven by the conviction that the dark era of small land ownership was gone forever, the local communist authorities destroyed the land records during the course of collectivization. In such cases, one should never underestimate the symbolic meaning of such actions, for it is precisely by means of the destruction of such records that the unacceptable past can be eliminated.

The criterion by which the reconstruction or restoration of the historical monuments of the former GDR was undertaken displays some interesting parallels. Consider, for example, the treatment of the central areas of Berlin and Dresden. One can hardly avoid coming to the conclusion that the *cultural resource management* of the GDR was intended to erase German history prior to 1945 through inadequate care and downright destruction of architectural symbols. In contrast, the institutions responsible for the protection of monuments in the *Bundesrepublik* distinguished themselves by careful attention to the preservation of historical buildings, which to an Italian observer, seems to have been exaggerated and overplayed. Attitudes toward history and the *management of cultural resources* in the GDR changed only when the regime was in its final death throes.

The attempt to destroy the unpleasant aspects of history can also be seen in the socialist restructuring of Bucharest, where, above all, the degenerate evidence of bourgeois construction was supposed to be eliminated. One can easily cite many similar cases of this iconoclastic rage against history. It must be remembered, however, that socialist regimes were based more upon a view of reality *as it should be* than on reality itself (Matevjević 1992: 41). Matevjević's observation holds true not only for the socialist perspective on the present and the future; it is also valid with regard to the past.

In this sense, the past was destroyed and, at the same time, replaced by a *how-it-should-have-occurred* construction of history. Socialism, therefore, did more than simply deny or negate history; in fact, socialist discourses about the past may be regarded as processes of historicization, though the historicization in question was of a distinctly teleological sort.

In the socialist countries, the manipulation of the past was the responsibility not only of politicians and official writers but also of social and cultural scientists, including the practitioners of the prevailing national ethnology. This is especially evident in the fixation of ethnologists on a peasant-based folk-culture. The farmers of southeast Europe had, in fact, been dispossessed and were either proletarianized by their joining into the agricultural collectives, urbanized by their migration into the cities, or systematized by means of centralized measures. Nevertheless, the image of a virgin and non-capitalistic folk culture was propagated by the state and party and cultivated and administered by ethnologists.

This systematic *invention of tradition* served, in the so-called peasant and worker states – the People's Democracies of Central-East Europe – to legitimate numerous political measures. Once again, Todor Živkov's Bulgaria is a good example. The invention of a monoethnic Bulgarian folk culture is no doubt closely connected with the policy of forced Bulgarianization or expulsion of the Turkish minority between 1960 and 1989 (Silverman 1992: 269). The fiction of a primeval Romanian folk culture that

was suppressed and eclipsed by neighboring groups also facilitated Ceaușescu's repressive policies in Transylvania.

The transition of 1989 radically altered this view of history. The socialistic interpretation of the past was suddenly declared to be a pack of lies that served the interests of the regime. At the same time, socialism itself was denounced as a fatal historical mistake. If, however, the socialist discourse about history was based on the selective destruction of the past, then the premise of the postcommunist construction of history is the reversibility of events. The first discourse rests on a prospective model, while the second is based upon a retrospective view. By the reversibility of events, I mean the idea that the burdensome past can and should be undone. According to the logic of this model, it is necessary and desirable to re-create the conditions of the pre-socialist era, as if socialism never existed – or as if it existed only outside of the flow of history. This endeavor was strikingly described to me by many interviewees who compared socialism to a dead-end street: “When one wants to come out of a dead end, one must return to the original point of entry”, they claimed.

In my view, most of the economic, political and social reforms of the postcommunist era are being conceived in accordance with the principle of the reversibility of events. In a variety of cases – in establishing the criteria for Latvian nationality, in the restitution of urban real estate in the former GDR and in the many instances in postcommunist societies where statues of Lenin have been torn down and street names have been changed – the agencies responsible for carrying out the reforms refer to a glorious pre-socialist past, which is seen as the basis for the transformation of the present and the determination of the future. A similar tendency is clearly evident in the design and execution of the agrarian reform law passed in Bulgaria in 1992. This law provides for the return of land to its former owners in accordance with the real property relations existing in 1946. To this end, committees were formed throughout the country and charged with a task indispensable for the reversibility of events: namely, the reconstruction of pre-socialist property rights. In this regard, the socialist period is treated by legislators as an historical black hole. They ignore processes such as urbanization and the occupational reorganization of rural strata, which fundamentally altered the social structure of Bulgaria over the last 45 years.

5. ACTUALIZED HISTORY AS A FORM OF KNOWLEDGE

Up to now, I have emphasized the strategic use of the past through the actualization of history. But this view, important as it is, carries the danger of limiting one's vision to the intentional and rational aspects of social behavior. It is obvious that actualized history is not born out of nothing; rather, it emerges from a very precise context that German historian Koselleck has defined as the space of experience (*Erfahrungsraum*) (Koselleck 1979: 349 ff.). This space may be experienced directly or in a mediated form, which can then be transmitted to others. In any case, it is unthinkable that the actualization of the past be realized without knowledge of what occurred before. Those who refer to the past, consciously or unconsciously, have recourse to a condensed and stratified selective knowledge. From the perspective of historical anthropology, one can say that every collectivity has, in regard to its own past, a kind of cognitive capital which represents the basis of a particular consciousness or historical sensitivity (Geertz 1983: 175).

Why is there such an evident difference in the attitudes of Italians and Spaniards toward the war in Bosnia? The explanation may appear at first sight to be banal: Italy has not sent any UN troops to the area, while Spain is represented by an important military contingent. Yet, an analysis the language used in official discussions, television reports and even in everyday conversations reveals another possible explanation, which, of course, does not exclude the first. The Spaniards seem to be more sensitive to the events in ex-Yugoslavia – in particular, the war in Bosnia – because they associate them with their own civil war. The Italians, on the other hand, have never been confronted with the same type of armed conflict and experience the same events with much less intensity. It is obvious that the siege of Sarajevo does not have the same meaning for Italians as it does for Spaniards, who see it in terms of the analogous dramas of Toledo and Segovia. Different forms of knowledge or cognitive capital have thus given rise to different kinds of historical sensitivity, which then crystallize in different attitudes toward the same events.

As this last example shows, actualized history does not consist of objective facts, even if it is based upon them. It is derived instead from what Husserl called internalized history (*innere Geschichte*) (Husserl 1962: vol. 9, 381). This internalized history, which may subsequently be actualized, represents a precious resource for social actors, who use it to interpret the future and project themselves into it. Every individual, as a member of a particular collectivity, constructs his or her own horizon of expectations by means of the past future. This is not the title of a science fiction film by Steven Spielberg but Koselleck's striking formulation, which sets the sphere of experience, i.e. the perceived past, in direct relationship to the horizon of expectations, (*Erwartungshorizont*) i.e. the projected future (Koselleck 1979: 349 ff.).

It is, thus, valid to conclude that actualized history, as a form of knowledge generated by particular spheres of experience, is a significant component in the formation of cultural systems, i.e. coherent wholes that include Weltanschauungen, value systems, rules and social practices.

6. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The difference between anthropological history and historical anthropology consists in the anthropologist's interest in various kinds of actualized history. The anthropologist takes the past into consideration only insofar as it is significant for understanding the management of the present or projections into the future.

History is of interest to the anthropologist as a form of knowledge which informs the collectivity's *savoir-faire* and its sense of the here and now. This specific knowledge may, of course, be based on actual occurrences, but even in this case they are products of conceptualization, as we have learned from Kant. Actualized history, regarded as an object of historical-anthropological investigation, is a conceived, imagined or even invented product.

To the anthropologist, history does not only consist of objective events or processes; it is, above all, a constantly re-elaborated and reinterpreted internalized history.

Actualized history is internalized history in use. It is characterized by its own array of symbols, myths, constructions and inventions. It may serve as an instrument of dominion, a strategy for resistance, an object of identification, an element of social cohesion or a detonator in collective conflicts. Actualized history is, therefore, an essential component in the basic social processes in which the members of a collectivity are involved.

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