Commentary – The Ethics of Never Again

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After reading Burkhard Liebsch's paper about *Biological reproduction, offspring, and radical otherness*, the first question that came to mind was whether we as sociologists have anything to say when it comes to ethics in our times. Is it better to leave ethics to the philosophers, and care intellectually only about what is and is not rather than what should or could be? In the following remarks, I try to suggest sociological ethics, in connection with the idea of this book and Christina Schües's invitation to contextualise the different perspectives of Israel and Germany. I will attempt to do this and at the same time do justice as far as I can to Burkhard Liebsch's reflections. If sociology is indeed about what is or even what was, how do we at the same time connect to an openness that reaches towards something new, undetermined by the past and unpredicted by the present? This is especially true in a country and within societies that are so shaped by the past. What is the relationship between our being "biological beings" and simultaneously historical ones? This also applies to people whose definition as biological people had disastrous consequences, as discussed clearly in Burkhard's paper. Let us stop for a moment at the point of the "radical future", in relation to Emmanuel Levinas.[1] Levinas has always fascinated me, and I can relate to the idea of "radical future" as absolute surprise, defining our responsibility to people who are not yet born. It connects in some ways with my own work on Hannah Arendt. At the end of her report of the Eichmann trial, she stated: "Every generation, by virtue of being born into a historical continuum, is burdened by the sins of the fathers as it is blessed by the deeds of the ancestors" (*Arendt* 1963: 298).

This brings us to the future. As Arendt has shown, the German and French words for "future" (*avenir* and *Zukunft*) mean something quite distinct from the

1 The translator Richard A. Cohen summarised Levinas' approach concerning "Time and the Other" (1987 : 11) under the heading of the "radical future".

English word "future". They mean something coming toward you rather than lying ahead of you like some kind of progress. The future does not emerge out of the past, nor is determined by it, and there is a radical freedom involved in constructing it. We know that the future is unforeseeable. It will have different categories of reality accompanied by different categories of thought. We will not be able to understand how it works until we or even our children get there. It will emerge out of the present like a *gestalt* that is more than the sum of its parts. But until it does – and it never does for us – we are always facing a future that is beyond us. Living in the transition between the present and the future, we have to continuously keep guessing what will best capture the future that might possibly be. These are precisely the visions of horror and hope articulated by Franz Kafka, who once claimed that there is "infinite amount of hope in the universe … but not for us".[2] And it is no coincidence that these very words are quoted by Walter Benjamin in his essay honouring Kafka. Hope is precisely what you need when you do not know what the future will bring, and a world order collapses. Thus, we need a new starting-point, one that continues the present but that also recreates it and understands its newness by maintaining a dialogue between present and past.

This is where I believe a sociological ethics comes in. Hannah Arendt (1958) called this "natality". I see this as similar to Levinas' radical future, as mentioned in Liebsch's paper. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt defines "natality" as the condition of having been born. She asserts that our natality is the "source" or "root" of our "capacity to begin", by which she means the capacity to break with the status quo and initiate something new. Only human beings possess this capacity, she says. Arendt is therefore claiming that our capacity to begin springs from our condition of having been born.

I have been busy in my work to translate this into a sociological ethics, and I hope it will make sense to you. We do have a powerful formula that provides us with moral certainty within a temporally organised world. I call this formula very simply *Never Again*. Never Again can mean many things to many different actors. As an apparent neologism, it has been surprisingly under-conceptualised. Are we talking politics? If so, what kind of normative implications does a politics of Never Again have? Are we talking aesthetics that imply a kind

2 Max Brod (1921, 1213) was a friend and a biographer of Franz Kafka. In 1921, he published a piece titled "Der Dichter Franz Kafka" ("The Poet Franz Kafka") in the literary journal "Die Neue Rundschau". Brod repeats this sentence "Oh, Hoffnung genug, *unendlich viel Hoffnung* – nur *nicht* für *uns.*" from a conversation he held with his friend in 1920.

of Never Again sentiment – a feeling without great political consequence? We need to explore the question of a globally relevant ethics in a world full of risks and uncertainties.

While in philosophy, morality often needs to be universal to be considered valid, in sociology other rules apply. Sociology is about social groups, particular experiences, and about how people, embedded in space and time, make sense of their lives and give meaning to their world. It deals with power, interests, and the social bases of our experiences. Morality, on the other hand, is about human beings in general, irrespective of temporal or spatial references, not about territorially confined groups and their frontiers. Moral rules are supposed to be inviolable and to apply to humanity as a whole. Morality is about dignity and the abstract human being, and does not need any kind of sociological garb. We need to inquire into the interface between particular actions and universal explanations of those actions by looking at a complex picture that combines cultural meanings and social structures of the sociological phenomenon. A first suggestion could be a moral perspective based on the actors' historical experiences and horizons. I would like to call it an "Ethics of Never Again."

The logic of *Never Again* tells those who use it that an event is already over; that the past, the catastrophe, has already passed. By embracing the Never Again paradigm, social actors construct a new temporal framework that represents the past and the present as radically different and antagonistic. However, while the catastrophe is placed behind us, it is situated in the future as well as a ghastly possibility. The future does not emerge out of the past, nor is it determined by it, but there is rather a radical freedom involved in constructing it. This is not the usual social-scientific lamentation, but a renewed effort to write the *Book of Lamentations*, wherein the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem is lamented, but where hope is always on the horizon:

> How lonely sits the city
> that once was full of people!
> How like a widow she has become,
> she that was great among the nations!
> She that was a princess among the provinces
> has become a vassal!
> (Lamentations 1:1, NRSV)

We are back in place and time and historical memory, which is situated, constructed, constantly evolving and reframing and reinterpreting events of the

past. It is a book about memory, but memory as an anxious ethics of anticipation. Those Judeans who remained after the destruction of Jerusalem composed the book around 2500 years ago. Worshippers are still reading it every year, on the day that commemorates the destruction of the temple and the city by the Babylonians. It is both a book about violence and grief in general, and a book about the violence and grief done to us at a certain point in time. You may recall Rembrandt's depiction from 1630 of Jeremiah lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem, which hangs in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. As a sociologist, I am interested, for instance, in understanding how people choose between a universal standpoint or a communitarian identity with their own group, and how they negotiate between the two. On the one hand, we can judge political ideas and practices according to a universal standard of reason; on the other, we are bound to lived experience and its intricacies. The politics of memory is no exception to this. Thus, the ethics of Never Again is a theory of morality based on particularity and on identity. And thus, we can read *Lamentations* as a general story or an historical one; we are back to square one of my comment. I certainly do not want to dismiss the roots of responsibilities in identity as particular ideologies, but to understand them as the basis of a sincere attempt to think morally. There is a communitarian argument at work here as well. This is a point not only about personal identity but also about who you are as a member of a community. However, membership of a community is the beginning, not the end. Thus, we will argue that a value-free description of the political world is not wrong, but is useless because the *Ought* is immanent in the *Is*. The notion that the basis of morality lies in identity, and that the basis of personal identity lies in collective identity – or in overlapping collective identities – is one possible answer to the question of how to maintain a tension between the universal and the particular. I am not arguing that all morality is based on identity but that some of it is, and that it is an essential part, because it is the part that makes us who we are. This part gives people moral motivation because it is the basis of their passions and themselves. Thus, we speak with different voices depending on the circumstances. Moral knowledge is knowledge in flux. Historical experience does separate us from others, but the question is how to deal with this separation. Public memory – even when institutionalised by education and regulated by law – is embedded in an affective matrix of "anxiety", which at one and the same time is capable of creating the conciliatory conditions of political virtue – Never Again – and of fuelling the terror of political passion – Again and Again. Never Again is not, however, merely a mental attitude. It starts with the body and its vulnerability – its mortality. Thus, it

seems that we are back to "biological beings", but this is certainly not enough. It also demands that people recognise this vulnerability and feel the need to act upon it. Vulnerability becomes one of the new global conditions, which is constantly mediated by direct access to the sight of suffering across the world. People become witnesses to the violation of others. They need to react in some way or other, considering that not doing anything is one of the possible reactions. Thus, the questions are: How and why do people react and how do they feel and think about the past in this connection? How do specific past catastrophes – whether of local or global significance – condition our understanding and reactions towards current forms of violence and human rights violations?

Universalist understandings of an Ethics of Never Again may conflict with particular interpretations. The array of meanings and lessons of Never Again can be not only diverse but also incompatible: for instance, present-day Germany's *Never Again*, which tries to be universal ("Never again war"), stands in contrast to Israel's *Never Again*, which tries very much to be particular ("Never again Us as victims!"). Here, the concept of "Negative Symbiosis" is very pertinent for this analysis. The Holocaust has bound "Germans" and "Jews" forever to the past, opening an insurmountable gap that conditions their mutual relationship, as well as the passing on of the group identity of victims – and in the German case also of perpetrators stuck in a permanent position of culpability – to succeeding generations.

Moreover, this also means different founding moments when we look at Germany and Israel. Here is a quote from the late Tony Judt that I would like you to consider for a moment:

> The problem with Israel [. . .] is not – as is sometimes suggested – that it is a European "enclave" in the Arab world; but rather that it arrived too late. It has imported a characteristically late-nineteenth-century separatist project into a world that has moved on, a world of individual rights, open frontiers, and international law. The very idea of a "Jewish state" – a state in which Jews and the Jewish religion have exclusive privileges from which non-Jewish citizens are forever excluded – is rooted in another time and place. Israel, in short, is an anachronism (Judt, 2003: n.p.).

Thus, more 16 years ago, Tony Judt declared Israel to be an anachronism, an entity refusing to move on to the next stage, to a kind of imagined transnational modernity. An anachronism means that there is a chronological inconsistency in which Israel is caught up, of its own volition. Israel is the past, while Europe is the future. Clearly, Judt's comment was also the *cri de coeur* of a disappointed

Leftist Zionist, but is it true at all? Like many proponents of a new transnational perspective, he like many others who look at Israel conceive of modernity as falling roughly into two phases. First is a nation-centred stage that began with the French revolution. Second is a cosmopolitan stage, the arcs of which begin at many different times after the Second World War. In this view, these various trends have recently begun to converge into visibly different paths of economic and cultural development, where the nation state is beginning to recede behind the increasingly transnational reality of our social, economic and cultural life. Now, in Israel this is not the case at all, but can you place this development on a past-present-future axis? I think we need to take into account the concept of "Non-Contemporaneity of the Contemporaneous" (better said in German as *Ungleichzeitigkeit der Gleichzeitigkeit*). I suggest a very banal sociological point here, namely that at every moment in time, various historical epochs and styles exist simultaneously and next to each other. They are not distinct and closed historical units. Looking at Israel and Germany, I would like to argue against a notion of historical time according to which one epoch replaces another, following the logic of evolution or progress. The radical break between tradition and modernity does not allow us to grasp today's realities in Israel. These worlds do exist here in Israel simultaneously and nothing seems simpler than to call Israel's pre-modern formations the traditional remnants of a world now past. Rather, what you have here are radically different descriptions of the same reality. Moreover, if we define modernity as the capacity to contain different descriptions of the same reality at the same time, we can easily define Israel as a hyper-modern society. The liberal credo of the "autonomous individual" is therefore just one of the many descriptions we have available to describe our humanness in this society.

Thus, imagine for a moment what would happen if Israel applied for membership of the European Union. What would be the response? Its application would either be deferred or flatly rejected. Why? Is Israel not European enough? Does it belong to Europe even though it is geographically located in Asia? Although it was founded in Europe, Israel is out of Europe but not in Europe. It lies in Asia and, like Turkey, connects Asia to Europe. Those who share the European continent, but do not share its Christian heritage, are seen as Europe's Other. Israel is certainly not a Christian country. One can almost claim that it is the opposite, with its particularistic and ethnic self-definition as a Jewish state. Israel arose out of the Ottoman Empire and constantly has to balance processes of Europeanisation, Americanisation, the expectations of international institutions, and the pressure of local groups and traditions.

Israel defines itself ethnically and its criteria of citizenship are exclusive. Wouldn't the term "European" imply, at least politically, a demand to change the basis of the Israeli national definition and found it on the conventional territorial principle – equality before the law of all citizens living within Israeli territory, irrespective of ethnic origins, race, community, religion or sex? Shouldn't Israel first "Europeanise" and stop opposing those who think that nations are either "imagined" or "invented" and as a consequence, live with the illusion that nationalism will disappear when it is shown and "proven" that the nation is a creation of the mind? Questions asked, demands made, from outside Israel but also from within, especially from the social and cultural circles we all move in.

However, the continuation of the Israeli-Arab conflict and the persistence of antisemitism will resist these kinds of tendencies. Israel attempts to be universally democratic and particularly Jewish at the same time, and thus reaches its limits of universality. Israel suggests a different reading of European history, undermining the project of reconciliation between former enemies enabled by the breakdown of the socialist regimes. Israel's alternative reading of European history keeps alive the memory of destruction for which Nazi Germany and its allies were responsible. Its existence presents a challenge to the European, especially Western European, countries, who see transnationalism as almost self-evident. Clearly, there are challenges to this ethics of Never Again and these are challenges facing society as well as the science of society: sociology.

Sociology is a child of that national gaze, and more than that, it provides the tools for understanding and legitimising the nation. Following the historical route of the universalist philosophical tradition from Hellenism via Christianity to the modern Western world makes the idea of universalism open to criticism from outside the Western traditions. People are doing it all the time. Nothing new here. However, we can do better, I believe. In the sociological ethics of Never Again, the universal means what it does because the particulars are its background, and are where the particulars mean what they do because the universal is their background. So that when one changes, the other changes – but neither disappears.

So, where does that leave us, looking at the notion of a radical future? Israel's legitimacy to exists as an ethnic nation state for the Jews rests partly on the Holocaust and, therefore, on the memory of that tragedy. Understood in this sense, the memory of the Holocaust is not just a monument to Europe's sense of the tragic. It is a memorial specifically to the European barbarism that

was made possible by the marriage of modernity and the nation state. Europe and within it Germany took a different path. Europe's collective memory of the Holocaust recalls the basis of the EU. It is a warning sign that when modernity develops exclusively in the grooves of the nation state, it builds the potential for a moral, political, economic and technological catastrophe, without limit, without mercy, and even without any consideration for its own survival. That is how the memory of the Holocaust was understood in Europe's own self-image. But it also laid the foundations for Israel's existence as a particular ethnic nation state where the Jews can feel protected after the Holocaust. An altogether European project. It is what enables Europe to find its continuity at the very point at which it breaks from the past. It allows it to establish future-oriented forms of memory, against national founding myths and myths of warfare and with a cosmopolitan self-critique. However, this is not how the memory of the Holocaust is perceived in Israel. Just the opposite. For Jews, the Holocaust took place because the Jews did not exercise political sovereignty. Protecting the Jews at all costs became one of the pillars of Israel's identity. Thus, Israel was founded at the very same moment when the new Europe arose out of the ruins of the Second World War. Both entities were formed on the same background, but former perpetrators and former victims drew very different conclusions from the memory of the Holocaust. To sum up: we should talk about a radical future, about an absolute surprise; otherwise, we could not sit here and talk. Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind the radical past as well, and there are less surprises there.

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