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into consciousness. Always a stylist, sensitive to any turn of phrase that might imply an easing or idealizing of the historical task at hand, Adorno uses "Aufarbeitung" to evoke (1) the personal and painful character of the consciousness that must emerge from Germany's "Zero Hour"; (2) the psychoanalytic effort to confront and "work through" the memory of offense and catastrophe; (3) the convergence, however distantly, of "Aufarbeitung" and "Aufklärung" (enlightenment, clarification); (4) a critique of the parallel notion of "mastering the past" (Vergangenheitsbewältigung), which is tainted, verbally at least, by the idea of some ultimate repression.

Theodor W. Adorno

What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?

Editor's Note: This lecture, included in Eingriffe (Interventions), has not been previously translated into English. The basis for the translation is the text in Adorno's Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 10, pt. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), pp. 555-72. For remarks added when the lecture was given a second time, see the same volume, pp. 816-17.

Adorno anticipates many issues raised by Bitburg. He places these in the broadest possible context. Themes included are: the survival of totalitarian tendencies in contemporary democracies; the anxiety about Russia; the importance of recognizing "objective" social forces so that the individual citizen or "subject" can become truly such, i.e., fully aware and politically responsible; a need to forget the past arising both from its criminal nature and from the sensitive consciousness itself; the nature of anti-Semitism; the possibility of achieving "enlightenment" through education or re-education as well as the role of psychoanalysis in this endeavor; and finally, how to advance political maturity in the new Federal Republic of Germany. The spirit of the essay and its title recall Immanuel Kant's tract of 1784: "Response to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" ("Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?"). Kant's opening sentence has become famous. "Enlightenment is humanity's exodus from its self-imposed immaturity."

Adorno's title needs clarification. "Aufarbeitung" is colloquially yet inadequately translated as "Coming to terms with." The German phrase has psychoanalytic as well as political connotations and may also allude to the way old materials are "worked up" into something new, like the fabric of a hand-me-down. The idea of reprocessing introduces a material metaphor even as Adorno deals with an intellectual or spiritual crisis: how to take the Hitler era

The question "What does coming to terms with the past mean?" must be elucidated. It is based on a phrase that has recently become highly suspect as a slogan. "Coming to terms with the past" does not imply a serious working through of the past, the breaking of its spell through an act of clear consciousness. It suggests, rather, wishing to turn the page and, if possible, wiping it from memory. The attitude that it would be proper for everything to be forgiven and forgotten by those who were wronged is expressed by the party that committed the injustice. In a scholarly controversy I once wrote that in the hangman's house one shouldn't speak of the noose; otherwise, you wind up with resentment. But the fact that a tendency toward an unconscious and not-so-unconscious defense against guilt combines so absurdly with thoughts of coming to terms with the past, is occasion enough for reflections about a region from which, even today, such horror emanates that one hesitates to call it by its name.

One wants to get free of the past: rightly so, since one cannot live in its shadow, and since there is no end to terror if guilt and violence are only repaid, again and again, with guilt and violence. But wrongly so, since the past one wishes to evade is still so intensely alive. National Socialism lives on, and to this day we don't know whether it is only the ghost of what was so monstrous that it didn't even die off with its own death, or whether it never died in the first place—whether the readiness for unspeakable actions survives in people, as in the social conditions that hem them in.

I don't want to go into the question of neo-Nazi organizations. I consider the continued existence of National Socialism *within* democracy potentially more threatening than the continued existence of fascist tendencies *against* democracy. Infiltration designates something objective; dubious figures make their comeback into positions of power only because present conditions favor them.

No one disputes the fact that in Germany it is not only among the so-called incorrigibles—let the term stand for the time being—

that the past has still not been mastered. Concerning this, people always refer to the so-called guilt complex, often adding that such a complex actually came into being only with the "construction" of a collective German guilt. Now it is indisputable that, in relation to the past, there is much that is neurotic: defensive gestures when one isn't attacked; massive affect in situations that do not fully warrant it; lack of affect in the face of the most serious matters; and often simply a repression of what was known or half-known. Thus, in a study of groups conducted by the Institute for Social Research,¹ we discovered many times that recollections of deportation and of mass murder were described by saving expressions or euphemistic circumlocutions, or that a vacuous sort of discourse formed around these memories—the universally accepted, almost benevolent expression "Kristallnacht," used for the pogrom of November 1938, is evidence of this tendency. A very large number of people claim not to have known what was happening then, although Jews were disappearing everywhere, and although it can hardly be assumed that those who experienced events in the East would always have kept silent about what must have been an unbearable burden for them. One may certainly suggest that a proportional relation exists between the gesture of "I didn't know anything about all that" and an indifference that is obtuse and frightened, at the very least. In any case, the confirmed enemies of National Socialism knew early on precisely what was up.

All of us today also recognize a readiness to deny or belittle what happened—however difficult it is to conceive that people are not ashamed to argue that it was surely at most only five million Jews, and not six million, who were killed. Irrational too is the widespread "settling of accounts" about guilt, as if Dresden made up for Auschwitz. There is already something inhuman in making such calculations, or in the haste to dispense with self-reflection through counter-accusations. Surely, military actions in time of war—Coventry and Rotterdam—are not comparable to the organized murder of millions of innocent people. Even their innocence, absolutely simple and plausible, is contested. The enormity of what was perpetrated is the very cause for a self-justifying attack: such things, so a lazy consciousness comforts itself, could not have occurred if the victims had not presented some kind of provocation; and this vague "some kind of" can then flourish wildly. The delusion goes even further than this glaring miscombination of fictitious guilt [of the victims] and a punishment that was only too real. At times the victors are represented as the originators of what the losers did when they themselves were still in power. As for the unspeakable acts of Hitler, those who tolerated his seizing power are made responsible, and not those who cheered him

on. The idiocy of all this really does testify to a lack of psychic mastery and an unhealed wound—although the thought of wounds is more appropriate to the victims.

All this talk, by the way, of a guilt complex displays something untruthful. Psychiatry, from which the phrase is borrowed (bringing with it associations from that source), implies that such guilt feelings are pathological, inadequate to reality: "psychogenic" as analysts call it. With the help of the word "complex" the impression is created that the guilt—which so many fend off, abreact, or deflect through the craziest rationalizations—is really no guilt at all, but exists only inside them, in their psychological makeup. So a real and terrible past is rendered harmless by being transformed this way—into a mere figment of the imagination of those who are affected by it. Or is guilt itself perhaps only a complex? Should we consider it pathological to burden oneself with the past, while the healthy and realistic person is absorbed in the present and its practical concerns?

That would be to appropriate a moral from "And it's as good as if it never happened," which is written by Goethe but uttered by the devil at a decisive point in *Faust* to reveal his innermost principle: the destruction of memory. The murdered are to be cheated even out of the one thing that our powerlessness can grant them: remembrance. The fixated attitude of those who don't want to hear or know anything admittedly finds itself in agreement with a mighty historical tendency. Hermann Heimpel has spoken repeatedly of the atrophy of the consciousness of historical continuity in Germany, a symptom of that social weakening of personal autonomy [*des Ichs*] that Horkheimer and I had already sought to trace in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.² Empirical findings of the kind that the younger generation in many cases no longer recognizes who Bismarck or Kaiser Wilhelm I was, have confirmed this suspected loss of history.

The forgetting of National Socialism should be understood far more in terms of a general social situation than in terms of psychopathology. Even the psychological mechanisms that defend against painful and unpleasant memories serve highly realistic ends. This is revealed when those who are defensive point out, freely and in a practical mood, that a too vivid and lasting remembrance of those events could harm Germany's reputation abroad. (Such zeal jibes poorly with the comment by Richard Wagner, who was nationalistic enough, that to be German means to do something for its own sake—so long as it is not taken a priori as a business venture.) The effacement of memory is more the achievement of an all-too-wakeful consciousness than it is the result of its weakness in the face of the superiority of unconscious processes. In this forgetting of what is scarcely past,

one senses the fury of the one who has to talk himself out of what everyone else knows, before he can talk them out of it.

Of course, the emotions and modes of behavior involved here are not plainly rational insofar as they distort the very facts to which they refer. But they are rational in the sense that they depend on social tendencies, and that anyone reacting in such a way feels at one with his time. Such a reaction is directly opposed to a successful resolution of the problem. If one doesn't trouble oneself with useless thoughts, one doesn't throw monkey wrenches into the works. It is advisable to speak along the lines of what Franz Böhm so pregnantly called "non-public opinion." Those who conform to a mood that is held in check by the official taboos—but therefore only gains in virulence—qualify simultaneously as part of an ingroup and as independent agents. After all, the German resistance movement remained without any grass-roots support during the war, and it's not as if Germany's defeat had magically conjured it up. One can rightly presume that democracy is more deeply rooted in Germany today than after the First World War: National Socialism—antifeudal and thoroughly bourgeois—politicized the masses and so, against its own interests, partly prepared the way for democratization. The Junker caste as well as the radical workers' movement has disappeared; for the first time something like a homogeneous bourgeois milieu has been produced. But the fact that democracy came to Germany too late—that is, that it didn't coincide historically with the high point of economic liberalism—and that it was introduced by the Allied victors—leaves the German people's relation to it without strong emotional connections.

It is rare that this is ever openly admitted, because for the moment things are going so well under democracy; and also because it would be contrary to the community of interests institutionalized by political alliances with the West, above all with the United States. But the rancor against "re-education" is sufficiently evident. The best to be said is that political democracy has been accepted in Germany as what Americans call a "working proposition"—something functional that up till now has allowed and even promoted prosperity. But democracy has not domesticated itself to the point that people really experience it as their cause, and so consider themselves agents [*Subjecte*] of the political process. It is felt to be one system among others, as if one could choose from a menu between communism, democracy, fascism, monarchy—yet not as something identical with people themselves, as the expression of their own maturity. Democracy is valued according to its success or failure, whereby special interests must also come into play, rather than as the union of the individual and the collective interest.

(The parliamentary system, in mass democracies, that represents the general will by "delegating" it, makes that process no easier.)

In Germany one often hears Germans themselves advancing the strange proposition that they aren't yet ready for democracy. They make an ideology of their own immaturity, not unlike youngsters who, when caught for some violent act or other, talk their way out of it by virtue of being mere teenagers. The grotesque character of this mode of argumentation reveals a flagrant contradiction. People who so unnaïvely play upon their own naiveté and political immaturity must already consider themselves, on the one hand, as political subjects whose responsibility it is to determine their own fate and to construct freely their own society. But, on the other hand, they come up against the fact that the existing circumstances [*Verhältnisse*] impose strict limits on such projects. Since they aren't capable of breaking through these limitations by their own powers of thought, they ascribe this inability—from which they do, in truth, suffer—to themselves or to the big shots or others. Once again, they divide themselves from within into subject and object. In any case, it characterizes the dominant ideology today that the more people are exposed to objective forces³ over which they have no power or believe that they have none, the more they personalize this lack of power. According to the received idea that all depends on the individual, they attribute to the individual everything that actually resides in the existing circumstances. As a result, the circumstances once again remain unclarified. In the language of philosophy one would say that in the people's alienation from democracy is mirrored the alienation of society from itself.

Foremost, perhaps, among these objective forces is the developing course of international politics. It appears to offer retrospective justification for the attack that Hitler launched against the Soviet Union. When the Western world essentially defines itself as a united front in its defense against the Russian threat, then it appears as if the victors of 1945 had foolishly torn down proven bulwarks against Bolshevism, only to rebuild them a few years later. From the only too readily available phrase "that's just what Hitler always said," it is a short step to the extrapolation that he was also right about other things. None but armchair preachers could gloss over the historical fatality that the very conception that once led Chamberlain and his ilk to tolerate Hitler as a watchdog against the East has outlived Hitler's defeat. And it truly is a fatality. For the threat by the East against the outposts of Western Europe is clear, and whoever does not resist it is quite literally guilty of a repetition of Chamberlain's "appeasement."

The only thing that's forgotten—the only thing!—is that this very threat was first unleashed by the actions of Hitler who brought upon

Europe exactly what, according to the “appeasers,” his expansionist war was supposedly meant to prevent. Even more than with the destiny of single individuals, the destiny of political entanglements involves a nexus of guilt. The resistance to the East has its own dynamic that brings Germany's past back to life. And not only ideologically—for sloganeering about the struggle against Bolshevism has always served as camouflage for those who have no greater esteem for freedom than the Bolsheviks did—but really so.

It was already observed in Hitler's time that the organizational power of totalitarian systems imposes something of its own essential character upon its opponents. So long as the economic differential between East and West continues to exist, fascist tactics have better chances for success with the masses than Eastern propaganda, although admittedly no rush toward fascism's *ultima ratio* is presently visible. But the same character types are susceptible to these two forms of totalitarianism. We misunderstand altogether the authoritarian personality type if we construe it as a function of a particular politico-economic ideology; the well-known oscillation before 1933 of millions of voters between the National Socialist and the Communist parties is no accident when considered in terms of social psychology. American research has established that this type of personality structure does not correlate easily with politico-economic criteria. It must be defined, rather, in terms of character traits such as thinking within the paradigm of power-powerlessness; rigidity and the inability to react; conventionality; conformist behavior; lack of self-reflection; and finally an altogether deficient capacity for experience. Authoritarian types identify with real power as such, prior to any particular content. Basically, they have only weak egos at their disposal, and thus need, as a substitute, to identify with large collectivities whose protection they seek. The fact that wherever one turns one finds characters like those depicted in the film *Wir Wunderkinder*⁴ is a consequence neither of the basic depravity of the world nor of peculiar traits attributed to the German national character. Rather, it is due to the identity of those conformists—who relate before the fact to the levers of any power apparatus—as potential followers of totalitarianism.

It is an illusion, moreover, that the National Socialist regime meant nothing but fear and suffering, although it did mean this even for many of its adherents. For countless people it wasn't all that bad under fascism. Terror's sharp edge was directed only against a few relatively well-defined groups. After the crises-ridden experiences of the pre-Hitler period, people were overcome by a feeling of “everything is taken care of,” and not only ideologically by means of collectively organized “fun-through-fitness” trips and flower boxes in the

factories. Compared with a previous laissez-faire, Hitler's world really did shield its own members—up to a point—from the natural catastrophes of communal life to which people were abandoned. A barbaric experiment in state control of an industrialized society, it anticipated today's crisis-management in violent fashion. The much-noted “integration”—the organizational tightening of the communal net that covered everything—also guaranteed protection against the universal anxiety of falling through the interstices and disappearing. For countless people, alienation's chill seemed to be eliminated by the warmth—however manipulated and imposed—of togetherness; the “people's community” [*Volksgemeinschaft*] of the unfree and the unequal was, as a lie, also the fulfillment of an old, familiar, evil bourgeois dream.

To be sure, the system that offered those kinds of gratification carried within itself the seeds of its own downfall. The economic burgeoning of the Third Reich rested to a great extent on the rearmament for war that brought on the catastrophe. But that diminished faculty of memory of which I spoke resists considering these arguments. It stubbornly glorifies the National Socialist period, which fulfilled the collective power-fantasies of those who were powerless as individuals and, indeed, felt themselves to be somebody only by virtue of such collective might. No analysis, however illuminating, can remove the reality of this sense of fulfillment, or the instinctual energies invested in it. Even Hitler's risky gamble was not as irrational as it then appeared to average liberal thought, or as its failure appears today to historical hindsight. His plan, to exploit the temporary advantage gained through massively accelerated rearmament, was not all that foolish from the perspective of what he wanted to achieve. Whoever looks closely at the history of the Third Reich, and above all of the war, will always feel that Hitler's defeat at particular moments appears to be accidental, while only the course of events as a whole displays a sense of necessity, as the greater technological and economic potential of the rest of the world finally prevailed so as not to be eaten alive—to a degree a statistical necessity and certainly not a recognizable step-by-step logic. The surviving sympathy for National Socialism does not need to employ much sophistry to convince itself and others that things could just as well have turned out differently: that what happened was, in fact, due only to mistakes, and that Hitler's downfall was a world-historical accident that the world-spirit might still correct.

On the subjective side, the collective narcissism in the human psyche—national vanity, in a word—was immeasurably exalted by National Socialism. The individual's narcissistic drives, for which a callous world promises less and less satisfaction, which nonetheless persist undiminished as long as civilization refuses them so much, find a

substitute gratification in their "identification with the whole."² This collective narcissism was grievously damaged by the collapse of the Hitler regime; a damage which, however, occurred in the realm of simple fact, without each individual becoming conscious of it and thereby getting over it. This is the social-psychological relevance of the talk about an unmastered past. Also lacking is the panic that, according to Freud's theory in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, sets in where collective identifications break down. If the great psychologist's theory isn't to be thrown out, there remains only one conclusion: secretly, unconsciously smoldering and therefore especially powerful, these identifications as well as a group narcissism were not destroyed but continued to exist. Inwardly the defeat has been as little ratified as after 1918. Even in the face of evident catastrophe, the collectivity formed by Hitler held together and clung to chimerical hopes, such as secret weapons, which were in fact possessed by others. From the viewpoint of social psychology, it would also be expected that this damaged group-narcissism is lying in wait to be repaired and grasps at everything in consciousness that might immediately bring the past into harmony with narcissistic wishes—but then it also, if possible, remolds reality as if this injury could be made not to have happened. To a certain degree this was indeed accomplished by economic prosperity and the feeling of "how competent we are."

Yet I doubt whether the so-called economic miracle—which everyone participates in, even as they also speak somewhat disparagingly of it—really extends, in a social-psychological sense, as far as one might think during times of relative stability. Precisely because hunger continues to exist on entire continents (despite the fact that we have the technology to eliminate it), no one can feel all that happy with his own prosperity. Just as individuals may laugh maliciously at a film character licking his chops and tucking his napkin under his chin, so too mankind doesn't grant itself any comfort when it knows too well that it is paid for by lack and misery: resentment strikes every happiness, even one's own. Society has become a term of rebuke a priori, even though the only thing bad about it would be that there are those who have *nothing* to eat; the supposed idealism that in today's Germany hypocritically attacks a supposed materialism owes much of what it considers to be its profundity only to repressed instincts. A hatred of comfort results in a discomfort with prosperity, at the same time that the past is glorified as tragic. But this malaise in no way issues merely from dark sources, but also again from much more rational ones. Our prosperity is the product of circumstances; no one

²Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Meinung Wahn Gesellschaft," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10/2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), pp. 588ff.

trusts in its unlimited duration. If one consoles oneself with the thought that events like the "Black Friday" of 1929 and the subsequent economic crisis could hardly happen again, this already implies trust in a strong state, one that—it is anticipated—will also protect people when their economic and political freedom is no longer there. Even in the midst of prosperity, even during the temporary labor shortage, most people, it seems, see themselves as potentially jobless, as welfare recipients, and therefore ultimately as the objects, and not the subjects, of society: this is the fully legitimate and reasonable basis for their discomfort. And it is clear that at virtually any moment this discontent can be accumulated and turned against the past and misused for the renewal of a disastrous politics.

Today the fascist fantasy undeniably blends with the nationalism of the so-called underdeveloped countries, which already are no longer called that, but rather "developing countries." So also during the war, in slogans about Western plutocracies and proletarian nations, a sympathy was expressed with those who felt that they had come up short in the imperialist competition and wanted to find a seat at the table. It's hard to say if and to what extent this tendency is already embedded in the anti-civilizational, anti-Western undercurrent of the German tradition: whether in Germany too there is a convergence of fascist and communist nationalism. Nationalism today is at once obsolete and current. Obsolete, because individual sovereign nations—at least those in advanced continental Europe—have forfeited their historical selfhood [*Substantialität*] in the face of the obligatory alliance of nations into great-power blocs under the supremacy of the strongest ones, an imperative already dictated by developments in weapons technology. The idea of the nation, in which the joint economic interests of free and independent citizens took a stand against the territorial barriers of feudalism, has itself become a barrier vis-à-vis the obvious potential of a global society [*Gesamgesellschaft*]. But nationalism is up-to-date only insofar as the traditional and psychologically invested idea of the nation (which still expresses a community of interests within the international world of business) has the power to harness hundreds of millions toward goals that they do not immediately perceive as their own.

Nationalism no longer quite believes in itself, and yet is required politically as the most effective means for bringing people around to insisting on objectively outmoded relations. That is why, self-deluded and not comfortable in its own skin, nationalism today puts on such grimacing features. Sure enough, it was never altogether without such features, which were the heritage of barbaric primitive tribal conceptions, but they were kept in check as long as liberalism really confirmed

the rights of the individual—also concretely as the condition for collective prosperity. Only in an era when it was already capsizing did nationalism become totally sadistic and destructive. The rage of the Hitlerian world against everything that was different—nationalism as a paranoid delusional system—already manifested this.

The appeal of precisely these features has scarcely diminished today: paranoia, the persecution mania that persecutes those onto whom it projects what it itself desires, is contagious. Collective delusions such as anti-Semitism confirm the pathology of the individual who shows that he is psychologically no longer able to cope with this world, and is thrown back upon a purely illusionary inner kingdom. As the thesis of the psychoanalyst Ernst Simmel puts it, such delusions may well spare half-mad individuals from becoming wholly so. Insofar as the madness of nationalism manifests itself openly today in the reasonable fear of renewed catastrophes, to that extent is its diffusion promoted. Madness is the substitute for the dream that humanity could organize its world humanely, a dream that a man-made world is stubbornly rejecting. Everything that happened from 1933 to 1945 is of a piece with pathological nationalism.

The fact that fascism lives on, and that the much-cited work of reprocessing the past [*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*] has not yet succeeded, and has instead degenerated into its distorted image—empty, cold forgetting—is the result of the continued existence of the same objective conditions that brought about fascism in the first place. Fascism, basically, cannot be deduced from subjective dispositions. Now as then the economic order, and to a large extent the economic organization built upon it, together maintain a majority of people in a state of dependence on conditions over which they have no control, thereby keeping this majority in a condition of political immaturity [*Unmündigkeit*]. If they want to live, they have no choice but to adapt themselves to the given circumstances, to conform; they have to put under erasure their status as autonomous subjects, which the idea of democracy appeals to; they can only maintain that status at the cost of renouncing it. To see through this obfuscatory complex demands of them just that painful intellectual effort which the organization of their everyday life, and not least of all an inflated and comprehensive culture industry, prevents. The necessity of such adaptation, to the point of identifying with the status quo, with the given, with power as such, creates the potential for totalitarianism, and is reinforced by the dissatisfaction and rage which that forced adaptation itself produces and reproduces. Because reality doesn't provide the autonomy or, finally, the possible happiness that the concept of democracy ac-

tually promises, people are indifferent to democracy, where they don't secretly hate it. This [democratic] form of political organization is experienced as ill fitted to social and economic realities; if one has to adapt as an individual, then one also wants the forms of collective life to adapt—all the more so since one expects of such adaptation the streamlining on the part of the state apparatus as a giant undertaking among a not-so-friendly competition of all against all. Those whose real powerlessness persists can't bear even the semblance of an improvement in their situation; they'd rather scrap the obligation of an autonomy that they suspect can't be used as a model for living, and they throw themselves into the crucible of the collective ego.

I've exaggerated the dark side, according to the saying that today only exaggeration can be the medium of truth. Please don't misunderstand my fragmentary and often rhapsodic remarks as so many Spenglerisms (to take after Spengler would be to make common cause with doomsday). My intention was to point out one of the tendencies covered up by the slick façade of everyday life before it overflows the institutional dams that formerly contained it. The danger is an objective one, and does not reside primarily in humanity as such. As I have said, it can be argued that democracy, along with everything that it presupposes, has a more profound hold on people today than it did during the Weimar period. In stressing what is not so obvious, I neglected what sober thinking must nevertheless consider: within German democracy, from 1945 to the present, the material life of society has reproduced itself more richly than at any time in human memory, and this too is not without social-psychological relevance. It would certainly not be over-optimistic to claim that things are not going badly for German democracy, and therefore not so badly for a real coming to terms with the past either—if there were only enough time and things were to remain stable.

Yet there lies in the concept of "having enough time" something naive, and also contemplative in the worst sense of the word [*etwas schlecht Kontemplatives*]. We are not mere observers of world history who could romp around more or less untouched in its enormous rooms, nor does world history itself, whose rhythm increasingly simulates that of catastrophe, appear willing to grant its subjects the time in which everything could get better on its own. This leads directly to the question of a democratic pedagogy. Enlightenment about what happened in the past must work, above all, against a forgetfulness that too easily goes along with and justifies what is forgotten. Parents, for example, who must endure embarrassing questions about Hitler from their children, and then, in order to exculpate themselves, speak of the good side and how it really wasn't all that terrible. In Germany

it has become a fashion to bad-mouth political education, and, while it surely could be improved, sociology already has data available indicating that political education, seriously conducted and not just as a tiresome duty, produces better results than one had generally thought possible. But if one takes the objective potential for the survival of National Socialism as seriously as I think it has to be taken, then this too will pose limits for a mature political pedagogy. Whether this pedagogy is sociological or psychological in its approach, in practice it will probably reach only those who are already open to it, and for this reason are hardly vulnerable to fascism. On the other hand, it is in no way superfluous to strengthen, through enlightened instruction, even this group against "non-public" opinion. One could well imagine that something like cadres might develop out of this group, whose influence in the most widely varied circles would then reach the whole of society. The chances for this become all the more favorable the more self-conscious these cadres are. Obviously, the process of enlightenment won't content itself with these groups alone.

Here I choose to sidestep a question that is very difficult and burdens us with the greatest kind of responsibility: namely, the extent to which we've succeeded, in attempts at public enlightenment, to explore the past, and whether it's not the case that precisely such insistence on the past doesn't awaken a stubborn resistance and bring about the exact opposite of what is intended. It seems to me that what is conscious can never bring with it as much fatefulness as what remains unconscious, half-conscious, or preconscious. Essentially, it is a matter of the *way* in which the past is called up and made present: whether one stops at sheer reproach, or whether one endures the horror through a certain strength that comprehends even the incomprehensible. For this task it will, however, be necessary to educate the educators.

The problem is aggravated by the fact that what are called the "behavioral sciences" in America are either unrepresented or represented only in the most paltry fashion in Germany. It is imperative to urge the universities to strengthen a sociology that would coincide with historical research on our own epoch. Instead of spouting at second hand pseudo-profundities about "the Being of man," pedagogy ought to take on the task that one so easily accuses "re-education" of having bungled. Criminology in Germany is at the moment nowhere near modern standards. But above all one thinks of psychoanalysis, which remains repressed to this day. Either it's lacking altogether, or it's replaced by tendencies that, while claiming to have overcome the much-abused nineteenth century, actually fall back behind Freudian theory, and so perhaps turn it into its very opposite.

The need for an exact and undiluted knowledge of Freudian theory is as imperative as ever. The hatred for it is directly of a piece with anti-Semitism, not just because Freud was a Jew but because psychoanalysis consists precisely of a critical self-reflection that puts anti-Semites into a seething rage. As unlikely as it is that anything like a mass analysis could be carried out—if only because of the time factor—it would still be therapeutic if rigorous psychoanalysis found its institutional place in, and so influenced, the intellectual climate of Germany—even if this merely consisted of making it self-evident that one shouldn't strike out against others but should reflect on one's self and one's own relation to whatever the hardened consciousness tends to rage at.

In any case, attempts to work subjectively against the objective potential for disaster should not content themselves with "solutions" that scarcely touch upon the real difficulty of what's at stake. References, for example, to the great achievements of Jews in the past, however true they may be, hardly do much good and smack of propaganda. And propaganda—the rational manipulation of the irrational—is the privilege of totalitarians. Those who resist the totalitarians shouldn't imitate them in a way that can only work to their own disadvantage. Speeches in praise of the Jews that segregate them as a group already concede too much ground to anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is so difficult to refute because the psychic economy of countless people needed it and, in an attenuated form, still seems to need it today. Whatever happens in the form of propaganda remains ambiguous.

I once heard the story of a woman who, after attending a performance of the dramatization of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, said in a shaken voice: "Yes, but really, at least *that* girl ought to have been allowed to live." Surely, even this was to be welcomed as a first step toward insight. But the individual case, which stands for and illuminates the frightful whole, became at the same time (by virtue of its individualization) an alibi for the whole that the woman forgot. The confounded thing about such observations remains that one wouldn't therefore wish to counsel against performances of the Anne Frank play or the like, since their effect indeed feeds into the potential for improvement—whatever one's objections and however much it seems to be a sacrilege against the dignity of the dead.

I also don't believe that too much is accomplished by social gatherings, encounters between young Germans and young Israelis, and other such organized acts of friendship, however desirable this contact may be. For this sort of activity depends too much upon the assumption that anti-Semitism essentially has something to do with Jews and

could be combated through an actual knowledge of Jews. In fact, the genuine anti-Semite is much more defined by his utter incapacity for any kind of experience or his lack of receptivity. Should anti-Semitism be primarily a product of the objective social conditions, and only secondarily of anti-Semites, then—in the sense of the National Socialist joke—they'd have had to invent the Jews if they hadn't already existed.

So long as one wants to struggle against anti-Semitism within individual persons, one shouldn't expect too much from recourse to facts, for they'll often either not be admitted or be neutralized as exceptions. One should rather turn the argument toward the people whom one is addressing. It is they who should be made conscious of the mechanisms that provoke their racial prejudice. Coming to terms with the past in the sense of aiming for enlightenment is essentially that sort of *turn toward the subject*: reinforcement of a person's self-consciousness and, with that, of a sense of self. This should be accompanied by a knowledge of the few durable propaganda-tricks that are exactly attuned to a psychological disposition that we must assume resides in people. Since these tricks are rigid and limited in number, there is no insurmountable difficulty in isolating them, making them known, and using them as a kind of vaccine. The problem of how to achieve, practically speaking, such personal, subjective enlightenment could probably only be solved by the collaborative effort of those teachers and psychologists who do not withdraw, under the guise of "scholarly objectivity," from the most pressing task facing their disciplines today.

Yet considering the social context or the "objective" force behind the still current potential for anti-Semitism, enlightening the individual person as such will not suffice—even should it be planned with greater energy and greater depth than before. If one wants to oppose an objective danger objectively, then a mere idea won't do, not even that of freedom and humanity, which in its abstract form—as we've recently learned—doesn't mean all that much to people. If the potential for fascism is linked to human interests (however limited they may be), then the most effective antidote remains an appeal to whatever truly illuminates those interests, and the most immediate of them. One would really be guilty of a baroque kind of psychologizing if one disregarded the fact that the war and the suffering it brought upon the German population, while insufficient to eliminate the potential for fascism, comes into play as a counterweight. Let us remind people of the simplest things: that open or disguised revivals of fascism will bring about war, suffering, and poverty within a coercive system, and most likely in the end Russian domination over Europe; that, in short, they lead to a politics of catastrophe. This will make a more profound

impression upon people than referring to ideals or even to the suffering of others, which, as La Rochefoucauld already knew, is relatively easy to dismiss. From this perspective, the contemporary malaise signifies little more than the luxury of a certain mood. For despite all psychological repression, Stalingrad and the nights of bombing are not so forgotten that one cannot explain to everyone the connection between a revival of the politics that led to them, and the prospect of a third Punic War. Even if one succeeds in making this clear, the danger persists. We will not have come to terms with the past until the causes of what happened then are no longer active. Only because these causes live on does the spell of the past remain, to this very day, unbroken.

Translated by Timothy Bahji and Geoffrey Hartman

EDITOR'S NOTES

This essay is a translation of "Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit," first published in 1959; copyright © Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1963; translation copyright © 1986 by Geoffrey Hartman.

1. Founded in 1923 and associated with the University of Frankfurt (hence the designation "Frankfurt School"), the Institute for Social Research supported Adorno and other intellectuals during the Hitler years. In 1938 it went into exile but maintained a kind of identity, first in Paris, then by its loose affiliation with Columbia University.
2. First published in 1944 in a mimeographed version, and in book form by Querido Press, Amsterdam, 1947. English translation by John Cummings (New York, 1972).
3. Adorno, influenced by Walter Benjamin, uses the word "constellations," suggesting convergence rather than totality or fatality.
4. 1958 film directed by Kurt Hoffmann, popular for his light comedies, about the so-called German economic miracle or wonder.