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Tzvetan Todorov: Hope and Memory

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The Last Hundred Years

ON 1 January 1950 I was eleven years old, sitting under what was then called the New Year's tree. The date was a round number, and I wondered if I would ever reach the even rounder number of 1 January 2000. It seemed so far off—a whole half century away! Surely I would be dead by then. But in just the blink of an eye, here we are already at the end of the century. Now the tendency is to look back, to wonder what there is to learn from the century just passed. For the celebration of the millennium I received an insane request to select the best books of the past thousand years. A thousand years is far too long a period to make any sense. But asking questions about the past century is a different matter. A hundred years is filled by three generations at most, and many people still in early middle age remember grandparents talking to us about the very earliest years of the twentieth century. A century can exist within personal and family memory. We can try to make sense of it.

I am not a “twentieth-century specialist” in the way that a historian or a sociologist or a political scientist might be. The historical facts are well known and easy enough to look up. But facts don't come with their meaning attached, and it is the meaning that interests me. I don't aim to repeat the work that historians have already done. My purpose is to think about the twentieth century as a writer concerned with understanding the age in which he lives. My personal history and my professional background have influenced my overall approach. I was born in Bulgaria and lived there until 1963, under a Communist regime; and since then I have lived in France. Professionally, I am a student of cultural, moral, and political history, with a special interest in the history of ideas.

What counted most in the twentieth century—what allows you to make sense of it—depends of course on who you are. For an African, for example, colonization and decolonization must presumably be the decisive political events of the past hundred years.

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And even among Europeans (I deal principally with twentieth-century Europe, with only brief excursions to the rest of the world) a great deal of variation is possible. For some, the major long-term event was women's liberation—women's entry into public life, their control of reproduction, and the sharing of traditionally "feminine" values of private life by both sexes. Others might argue that the massive decrease in child mortality, the no less impressive increase in life expectancy, and the ensuing alteration of the demographics of Western societies must count as the most salient features of the twentieth century. Many presumably count the great strides made by technology in fields such as nuclear power, biogenetics, mass media, and electronic information systems as the major developments of the past century.

These views are all acceptable, but my own experience steers me in a different direction. For me, the central event of the century was the emergence of the unprecedented political system called *totalitarianism*, which, at its peak, ruled a substantial part of the planet. This evil has now vanished from Europe (though it lingers on in other continents), even if its legacy can still be felt. What I want to explore in this book are the lessons we can draw from the great twentieth-century conflict between totalitarianism and its enemy, democracy.

To say that the twentieth century was dominated by the fight between these two forces is to assert a set of values that not everyone shares. The problem is that Europe suffered not one but two totalitarianisms, Communism and Fascism. The two came into violent ideological and then military conflict. At different times, democratic states came more or less close to each of them. The three possible configurations of these regimes have all been tried out in different periods. First of all, Communists put all their enemies in the same basket (as capitalists), and saw liberal democracy and Fascism as moderate and extreme versions of the same evil. Then, from the mid-1930s, and to a greater extent during the Second World War, the map changed: the democratic and Communist blocs joined together in an antifascist alliance. Finally, a few years before the outbreak of the war and once again since its end, Fascism and Communism have been seen as two variants of the same species, totalitarianism, a term first coined by and for the Italian Fascists. I will come back to the definition and delimitation of these terms, but for the present it

should be clear enough from the way I present the issue that I find the third approach the most enlightening.

This choice of totalitarianism as the major event gives a quite specific focus to the subject of this book. I talk mainly about a single continent, the one where I live, and also about a rather shortened version of the twentieth century, from 1917 to 1991 (with some consideration of the prehistory of that central period, and some questioning of the last decade of the century). In addition, I restrict myself to the public sphere alone, and will leave private life, the arts, the sciences, and technology to one side. There is always a price to be paid in the quest for meaning. It involves making choices and comparisons—and obviously other choices and comparisons could have been made in this book. The meaning that I discern does not exclude other kinds of meaning but should, ideally, complement them.

My opening hypothesis—that totalitarianism was the great innovation of the twentieth century and also its greatest evil—has one immediate consequence. We have to give up the idea, so dear to many great minds of previous ages, that progress is a continuous and cumulative process. Totalitarianism was a novelty, and it was worse than what went before. That does not mean that humanity is set on a downward trajectory. All it suggests is that history is ruled by no iron law, and maybe by no law at all.

The opposition of totalitarianism and democracy and the opposition of the two variants of totalitarianism itself, Fascism and Communism, is the first major theme of this book. But all this belongs now to the past, and only survives among us because of human memory. Memory should not be thought of as a mechanical recording of what has happened. It has many forms and functions, and we have to choose between them; it develops in stages, each of which can be distorted or disturbed; it can be possessed by different people who derive different moral attitudes from it. Is memory necessarily a good thing? Is forgetting always a curse? Does the past always help us to understand the present, or can it serve to confuse our view of the here and now? Are all uses of the past permissible? An analysis of the memories that people have of the twentieth century thus forms the second theme of this book.

Although my principal subject is the meaning of the central event of the century, I must also acknowledge the more immediate past, the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989,

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and examine it in the light of the lessons drawn from the analysis of what went before. Totalitarianism is now vanquished. Has the reign of good begun at last? Or are there new perils threatening liberal democracies? The example I have chosen is the Kosovo war of 1998–99. Thus, the totalitarian past, the ways in which it survives in memory, and the light it may throw on more recent events are the three movements of my inquiry.

I have interlaced my reflections on political good and evil in the twentieth century with portraits of six individuals whose lives were deeply affected by totalitarianism, but who withstood its onslaughts. The men and women I recall were not fundamentally different from other people: they were not heroes or saints, or even “righteous.” They were fallible individuals facing dramatic choices in their lives; they all suffered physically but sought to pass on the fruit of their experience to others, through writing; they came close to the evil of totalitarianism but were more clear-sighted than most. Through talent and eloquence they found ways of communicating what they had seen, without hectoring or sermonizing. They came from various places—Russia, Germany, France, and Italy—but they share a family resemblance. Through the different shadings that they give it, a single emotion can be felt in their works: a kind of horrified fear that does not freeze or paralyze them. They also shared a way of thinking, for which the most appropriate label would be *critical humanism*. The singular destinies of Vasily Grossman, Margarete Buber-Neumann, David Rousset, Primo Levi, Romain Gary, and Germaine Tillion help us to avoid despair.

In some distant future how will the twentieth century be recalled? As “the century of Stalin and Hitler”? That would grant those tyrants an honor they do not deserve, glorifying the perpetrators of great crimes. It would be a pity to reproduce the errors of the past in that way. For myself, I hope that what will be remembered of this dark period are the few luminous figures who in their dramatic lives kept their heads and their senses and who never stopped believing, in spite of everything, that actual human beings provide the only legitimate ideal for human aspiration.