

# Rendering the Invisible: On Memory and Social Progress

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**Abstract:** *Rendering the Invisible: On Memory and Social Progress* argues that remembering past trauma is crucial to social progress. Neither amnesia nor forgetting serve as effective means towards the ends of a more just society. At its base, the argument that the ends justify the means will be shown to be inadequate where social progress is concerned. In order to demonstrate the above thesis the essay proceeds in two phases. In the first phase the three main reasons for which both amnesia and forgetting function as means severed from the ends of social progress are sketched. These reasons include: the objective (the object remains present under the concealment of the amnesia or forgetting), the subjective (on some level the subject is always aware of what it is they are forgetting) and the problem of false transcendence (whereby an imported solution shirks the particularity of the society standing in need of progress). In the second phase dialectical memory, as a means inseparable from its ends, is introduced as a conduit towards social progress.

## Essay:

*Existence always carries forward its past, whether it be by accepting or disclaiming it. We are as Proust declared, perched on a pyramid of past life, and if we do not see this, it is because we are obsessed by objective thought. We believe that our past, for ourselves, is reducible to the express memories which we are able to contemplate. We sever our existence from the past itself, and allow it to pick up only those threads of the past which are present.*

- Maurice Merleau-Ponty  
*Phenomenology of Perception*

Posing the question: 'is it conceivable that social progress is under certain conditions better served by amnesia and forgetting?' resuscitates the age-old question: 'do the ends justify the means?' While philosophical discourse offers a spectrum of answers, one very clear current, the one on which I will primarily draw during this essay, essentially argues that no, not only do the ends not justify the means but the ends themselves are inseparable from the means. Examining the above thesis with regards to our current dilemma, we find that the means, remembering, and the ends, social progress, are indissoluble. In other words, the ability to remember without simultaneously evoking the desire for revenge or lapsing into established patterns of violence and accusations is both the indication of and tantamount to the building of a just society. Only in a society where both the means and ends are just could social

progress be a possibility. Other means of trying to *get over* the past are incomplete at best, while at worst, they lend themselves to repression and cyclical repetition. According to Adorno, forgetfulness and amnesia sever the past from the present; moreover, this severance figures as a serious social problem. In his 1966 essay “Education after Auschwitz,” he argues that the *spirit of barbarism* which led to the Holocaust is still at large, albeit in invisible form.<sup>1</sup> For Adorno, barbarism is not carried out by barbarians. Rather, the invisible danger is the ubiquity of everyday forgetfulness, complacency and repression. In concurrence with Adorno, this essay will develop the thesis whereby memory is fundamental to social progress. The essay will commence by defining amnesia and forgetting followed by examining the three principal reasons for which they are antinomies of social progress. Finally, I will argue how a certain form of memory, which I will name dialectical, represents the conflation of ends and means from which social progress can emerge. In addition I will analogously illustrate my argument using the image of growing a tree from poisoned or conflict infused soil.

I will first briefly outline what I mean by amnesia and forgetting. While they serve separate technical functions, both are antithetical to memory. At the most basic level, amnesia is relatively passive whilst forgetting can be considered as active. Coming from the Greek notion of *a* (not) *mimneskesthai* (to recall) amnesia is a temporal illness in which the sufferer experiences no past and no future. The amnesiac, in an extreme case, floats on a narrow sliver of the present cut off from her own yesterdays and tomorrows. Neither temporal continuity, (I am the same person who was younger and will be older), nor causality, (my actions last year resonate today and will continue to exert upon next year), are part of amnesiac temporality. Someone suffering from amnesia would be unable to account for how or why they find themselves at a particular crossroads. An amnesiac’s temporality is porous; her history is full of holes and present is the crude sewing together of ambiguous patches. Amnesia infects the individual whether it is by sickness or by accident. An individual cannot actively become an amnesiac; the amnesiac cannot enter or exit the state of mind at will.

Forgetting, on the other hand, is usually characterised as an active process. In Greek mythology forgetfulness is represented by the underworld river Lethe. Lethe plays a prominent role in various philosophies, perhaps most notably in Book X of Plato’s *Republic*, in the Myth of Er, when the souls about to be reincarnated or transmigrated drink from it on their way back up to their next lives.<sup>2</sup> Lethe, as Heidegger points out, means concealment: “Λήθη, oblivion, is a concealment that withdraws what is essential and alienates man from himself, i.e., from the possibility of dwelling within his own essence.”<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough, □λήθεια, the Greek word for truth, thus implies an *unconcealedness*.<sup>4</sup> The notion whereby unforgetting, or simply remembering is fundamental to the removal of the concealments shrouding the truth will, later in this essay, manifest as that which permits reconciliation or the transcendence of trauma.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models, Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. H. Pickford, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 191.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992, 621a.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Parmenedies*, trans. André Schuwer ad Richard Rojewicz, Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 1992, p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 72.

These initial descriptions lead us to the first reason why neither forgetting nor amnesia could function as agents for or processes of social progress: the continued presence of the non-remembered object. Neither forgetting nor amnesia rid the subject of the forgotten object. Concealment is necessarily concealment of something, whether that something is an action or a lack of action, an item or a void. For example, while the amnesiac might not be able to remember the car accident, the car accident happened and damage caused by it (quite possibly including the amnesia) cannot be ignored away. In order for those around the amnesiac to facilitate a recovery, they must both reconstruct the specific circumstances of the accident and try to help the patient uncover the particular memories they have lost. Furthermore, an alternative yet complimentary means of looking at amnesia, described in the June 7, 2008 WNYC Radiolab broadcast on memory, argues that a memory is an object created every time an experience is conjured in the mind of the person who is remembering. It follows that a memory in the mind of an amnesia patient is the most pure and intact memory possible as it is never accessed or re-interpreted. Not only does what is being remembered not disappear, but the memory itself persists as an object in its own right even when it is not being recalled. Similarly, forgetting, like amnesia, is always forgetfulness of something. Like in the case of amnesia, that which is forgotten still somehow has a presence even if it is hidden. This presence, despite its invisibility, manifests in the continued influence over behaviour and decision making.

Taken within the context of social progress amnesia and forgetting cannot do away with the wrong that has been committed, the trauma experienced, the war, the colonialism, any and every painful memory. These memories are maintained and preserved even if they are not wholly visible. This preservation impedes the means, forgetfulness or amnesia, from dealing with trauma. The problem endures; even if it is overlooked, it continues to emit its poison. Imagine for a moment that in order to grow a new tree we reclaim seeds from the one that has just died and plant it in the soil from which it came without examining the cause of the plant's death. The likelihood that the new plant will survive is slim. The ends, the health of the plant or social progress, cannot be reached by means that have not been detoxified. In order to ensure the growth of a healthy plant both the soil and the seeds must be examined. Failing to do so invokes a form of neglect ultimately amounting to a form of negation.

Negation is the second reason for which amnesia and forgetfulness are ill suited for social progress. By negation I am suggesting a sort of denial of the concealed object. As demonstrated in the above paragraphs, regardless of whether this negation is passive, in the sense of amnesia or active as can be the case with forgetting, the object does not fully disappear under its concealments. We must now examine what happens to the subject during such concealment. In the case of forgetting, particularly when it is active, the person who is forgetting somehow remains aware of the object intentionally being concealed. Merleau-Ponty describes forgetfulness as follows: “[...] I keep the memory at arm's length, as I look past a person whom I do not wish to see.”<sup>5</sup> I choose not to *look* at a particular person. However, I cannot help but *see* that person on some level. In fact, seeing them was the trigger that made me look past them. In other words, I know at all times what it is I am concealing. Merleau-Ponty also gives an example of when forgetting is more passive. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* he describes a situation wherein a man on bad terms with his wife

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<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, New York: Routledge Classic, 2002., p. 187.

leaves a book from her in a drawer, forgets about it and rediscovers it when they have reconciled.<sup>6</sup> In both instances we note that forgetfulness from the point of view of the subject is incomplete.

Looked at on a larger social scale, negation can often take on a nefarious dimension; amnesia and forgetfulness as means have often led to societal developments antithetical to what is normally considered to be social progress. As an extreme case it is easy to conceive of a state's ministry of information dispensing all of its resources on either suppressing memories of the past or forging a correct or particular view of history. Such actions are often accompanied by the simultaneous dispersing of an official image of how social progress ought to appear. Neither the vision of historical truth nor the future picture of social progress are limited to accuracy of representation. Returning to our central metaphor, if in the first instance we illustrated a tree or civil society doomed because the root causes of its illness were not purged, in the instance of negation we see the survival of a twisted tree. This surviving tree can hardly be considered to be healthy. Analogously, whatever advances take place in the twisted social order cannot be considered to be progressive.

Maintenance and negation, the first two reasons for which amnesia and forgetting cannot facilitate social progress, cancel one another out. Amnesia and forgetting cannot make the object go away while the presence of the object simultaneously renders complete and irrevocable amnesia or forgetting impossible. However, what about the possibility that in spite of the presence of the past and notwithstanding the danger of reconfiguring history, amnesia and forgetting allow us to *get over* or transcend the past? *Getting over* the past via amnesia and forgetting eschews the process of truth and reconciliation which necessitates remembering, also conceived as an un-concealment or un-forgetting of the truth. The only way *getting over* the past by amnesia or forgetting is possible is via the possibility of transcendence by the imposition of an external resolution. The question remains, can this disconnected transcendence achieve social progress?

Disconnected transcendence is when a model for social progress is imported from outside a society thus facilitating the construction rather than the reconstruction of a society. Returning to the analogy of the tree, disconnected transcendence would relocate a successful tree from another ecosystem, either similar or different in character, to the ecosystem that has been destroyed in the hopes that something will grow. Regardless, the success of the new tree is disconnected from original tree that has died. In less allegorical terms, we can conceive of a political system or an economy in tatters being given a new categorical charter re-creating the society in the image of another: the new society is built on top of rather than out of the ruins of the old society. The subtle difference between 'on top of' versus 'out of' is the critical key to distinguishing transcendence from disconnected transcendence. The significance of this distinction comes to bear in the following questions: can an imported formula, wherein the contingencies of the society in question are merely slotted into the blanks in the formula, actually serve social progress? Does not the poisoned ground on which the society is built threaten the possibility for the success of any society? Is not the society standing in need of social progress demolished under the weight of the imposed model?

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p. 187.

I would like to suggest that while disconnected transcendence can facilitate the construction of a society, it cannot facilitate the reconstruction of the particular society in question. The danger of disconnected transcendence lies in the great potential for quashing that which is being saved and reducing the plurality and particularity of societies to one universalist vision. The means (the external solution) and ends (universalised social progress) are sundered from the society in question. In sum, for these three reasons outlined in the preceding paragraphs: the active presence of the object, the awareness of the subject best demonstrated in active forgetting and the dispossession of disconnected transcendence, neither amnesia nor forgetting are effective means of promoting social progress.

If forgetfulness and amnesia have shown themselves to be incomplete or contrary to social progress by the vigorous separation of means and ends, then we must now turn to how remembering, in unifying means and ends, contends with the past and expedites social progress. Memory is the presence of the past while remembering is the means through which the past's *actuality* (*Aktualität*: current being) is recognised. Returning to Adorno and how the severance of the past from the present is tantamount to a haunting spirit of barbarism, memory surfaces as the antidote to the quandaries into which forgetting and amnesia plunge a society. Adorno believed that memory can preserve, negate and transcend (sublate: *Aufhebung*, colloquially means 'lifting up from underneath') the past. Memory as *Aufhebung*, as proposed by Adorno can be considered as dialectic. "Dialectics" here implies a philosophical method whereby an inadequate concept is sublated, (corrected and transcended) by a new concept. Most importantly, the new concept comes from within the old concept in the same manner argued by Marx in The Communist Manifesto whereby capitalism creates its own gravediggers; the proletariat preserves, negates and moves beyond the bourgeoisie. A dialectical conception of memory is a means of working through the past that simultaneously allows for social progress by preserving the specificity of the society in question while moving beyond the progress-stunting trauma.

Dialectical memory distinguishes itself first from amnesia and forgetting and second from un-dialectical memory in that it navigates the divide between total preservation and total negation without falling into the trap of disconnected transcendence. In order to illustrate dialectical memory, we can return to the image of the tree: not only is the ground into which the new tree is planted detoxified, but in order to figure out how to clear up the soil, the sick tree had to be analysed and its sickness exposed. In a similar manner to inoculations against diseases, a benign form of the disease in question must be injected into the body, in the case of social progress the body signifies the body politic. In the language of Adorno's negative dialectics, the problem, the non-identity, holds the key to unlocking its own solution. As he puts it: "[t]he splinter in your eye is the best magnifying-glass."<sup>7</sup> Looking at society, the only way a particular society can progress beyond war and devastation is by examining why and how it came into such a state, rendering the invisible visible, and converting these tensions via sublation into just ends.

Dialectical memory is a means of social renewal, renewal in that it reclaims from its cultural past in order to move forward thus healing temporal amnesia and averting the impossibility

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<sup>7</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, W., *Minima Moralia, Reflections on Damaged Life*, trans. E. Jephcott, New York: Verso, 2005.

of forgetting. In other words, only dialectical remembering allows for progress by avoiding repetition and repression by transcending from within. Dialectical remembering can take many forms from urban regeneration to thoughtful memorialising. That being said, perhaps education plays the most significant role in a society dialectically remembering in that it can simultaneously preserve history and expose the inherent tensions and inconsistencies in order to move beyond past wrongs towards a more just society.

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## ***Additional Source***

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