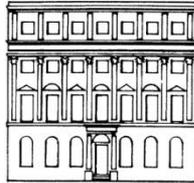


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## BULLETIN

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Lucian Hölscher:

*The First World War as a 'Rupture' in the European History of the Twentieth Century: A Contribution to the Hermeneutics of Not-Understanding*

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## ARTICLE

### ***THE FIRST WORLD WAR AS A 'RUPTURE' IN THE EUROPEAN HISTORY OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: A CONTRIBUTION TO THE HERMENEUTICS OF NOT-UNDERSTANDING***

LUCIAN HÖLSCHER

The history of the nineteenth century in Europe is a history of long continuities; that of the twentieth one of ruptures and discontinuities. Reasons for this are not only the numerous wars and the collapse of political, social, and economic systems, but also the radical change in structures of scientific and religious orientation and the inventories of aesthetic expression (*outillage mental*) by which people represented the world in which they lived. At times of radical change such as the First and Second World Wars, the seizure of power by Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco, the Russian Revolution and all the socialist revolutions that followed it, some sections of society at least were gripped by a confusion long-since unknown; old images of history broke down and new ones took their place. The history of the twentieth century is therefore pervaded not only by political ruptures, but also by mental ones, which even today we find it difficult to understand. In this article I should like to examine why it is so hard to understand the past properly, beyond historical ruptures, and how we can overcome these difficulties in writing history. This is what I mean by the new and somewhat puzzling concept of a 'hermeneutics of not-understanding'.<sup>1</sup>

Trans. Jane Rafferty (GHIL). This article is based on a lecture delivered at the German Historical Institute London on 20 Nov. 2012. Thanks to Jane Rafferty for her careful translation of the German manuscript and Valeska Huber for her skilful editing.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this concept see Lucian Hölscher, 'Hermeneutik des Nichtverstehens', in id., *Semantik der Leere: Grenzfragen der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Göttingen, 2009), 226–39.

I *The Concept of 'Rupture' in Modern Historiography*

In twentieth-century historical works the concept of 'rupture' occurs time and again.<sup>2</sup> But what does it mean? The first thing to establish is that the concept of a historical 'rupture' always relates to an assumed continuity, that is, an overall context of history, as has been part of the general understanding of world history since the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The existence of an overall context for all historical events was not, up until then, taken for granted; indeed calling it into question was a productive achievement of modern historical philosophy. This is what raised history to the level of an academic discipline in the first place.<sup>4</sup> The rejection of such an overall context must therefore arouse considerable unrest amongst historians.

I shall start by discussing the concept of 'rupture' in historical science. When historical works talk about ruptures, this is generally in terms of historical cuts, historical caesuras; what in earlier times was called 'epochs' before the word took on the new meaning of a period in history.<sup>5</sup> Talking about a rupture in this way can either place it retrospectively within the whole of history to date, thereby structuring its course, or it can also anticipate the course of history, thus drafting it into a future that is yet to happen. But in both cases talking about a historical rupture in the sense of a historical caesura assumes the

<sup>2</sup> See Bruce Mazlish, 'Ruptures in History', *Historically Speaking*, 12/3 (June 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See Hans Michael Baumgartner, *Kontinuität und Geschichte: Zur Kritik und Metakritik der historischen Vernunft* (Frankfurt am Main, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> See Reinhart Koselleck, 'Wozu noch Historie?', in id. (ed.), *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte: Aufsätze und Vorträge aus vier Jahrzehnten* (Berlin, 2010), 32–51; id., Article 'Geschichte', in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, 8 vols. (Stuttgart, 1972–97), ii. (1975), 503–718.

<sup>5</sup> For the general discussion of the concept of 'ruptures in history', see the conference 'Ruptures and Continuities in European History (Sixteenth–Twentieth Centuries): Periodizations in History, Historiography and the History of Historiography', held at the Berliner Kolleg für Vergleichende Geschichte Europas in April 2008 <[hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=2186](http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=2186)>, accessed 27 Mar. 2013.

existence of an overall context of history, a historical totality, which is in fact structured by a caesura of this sort.

Applied to twentieth-century European history, however, such a concept of rupture is too tame: it does not do justice to the historical reality. We are talking here about ruptures in a far more radical sense. Ruptures mark not only epochs within a history perceived as unified, but also the collapse and distortion of entire drafts of history. In 1918, 1933, 1945, and 1989 in Germany not only were new chapters opened in the book of history, but the existing books were themselves thrown overboard and new ones introduced. And this happened not only in Germany, but in many countries, not always at the same time, but with similar consequences.<sup>6</sup> The world of historical ruptures is one in which various drafts of history exist and are exchanged. Changing from one to the other means that not only the present is altered, but the future as well, and even the past.

This reflects what many people living in the twentieth century experienced. In the course of their lives they had to re-learn, often not once but many times, how to locate themselves in history. They had to appropriate a new past and gear their hopes, expectations, and fears towards new futures. Many crumbled in the face of such a challenge; others adapted of necessity to the new situations, not without a touch of bitter cynicism. When we, as historians, confront this fact, then we are also carrying out a piece of historical justice. We stop drafting history solely from the retrospective point of view of our own time, of our own experiences and questions of history. And we start to take the perspective of contemporaries themselves in a new and more serious way.

But this is where we encounter a considerable difficulty. We say that in ruptures of history, historical patterns of orientation disintegrate and are replaced by new ones, past experiences lose their dom-

<sup>6</sup> If we look at the world beyond Europe, the problem often presents itself in an even more extreme form. In Japan and many other East Asian countries, their image of history only conformed with that of the West when they opened up to the West at the end of the nineteenth century, assuming the Western form of a process of history orientated towards progress for the first time. See Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria (eds.), *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften* (Frankfurt am Main, 2002); Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 2009).

inant significance for the future, that ethical values and inventories of aesthetic expression become less convincing than they have been hitherto. But if this is true, then the question arises as to whether we, too, just as much as those who were alive at the time, are not affected by this loss. How can we today understand what these contemporaries – after the historical rupture they went through – were often unable to understand themselves? Are not we, with our understanding of history, bound just as much as they were to the time when concepts acquire their meaning, experiences their value, values either prove themselves, or, indeed, do not?

Greater historical distance may perhaps modify certain judgments that were reached too quickly, norms that were once rejected; it may also relativize principles that were once new, but which have themselves become old-fashioned in the meantime. But the main task of the historian here is to describe the historical transition from the old to the new, to explain how the old norms came to be discredited and what made the new ones attractive, what constituted their potential for hope, their surplus of utopianism. For however we might engage with the past morally, aesthetically, or theoretically, we always remain guests in the past. We have our own home in the present. That is what we must always keep in mind, particularly in the alien world of times gone by. Ultimately something about the past always remains closed to us, impenetrable despite all hermeneutic efforts. That is why we must try to embrace a hermeneutics of not-understanding which brings the limits of understanding more sharply into focus.

## II *Three German Biographies*

In order to give concrete form to the possibilities of this hermeneutics of not-understanding, I should like to look now at the lives of three German artists and scholars who lived through a rupture in history during the First World War. They stand for many other contemporaries, not only in Germany, but in every country that went to war. And similar fates can also easily be traced from the period of the Second World War, the collapse of the Communist systems at the end of the 1980s, and other periods of upheaval. But in the First World War they were still new, surprising, and unexpected and that is why they hit people particularly hard.

George Grosz

My first case is the artist George Grosz, who, having originally joined up voluntarily in the winter of 1914, became a passionate opponent of the war.<sup>7</sup> With his drawings in the last years of the war and the first post-war years he carried out some of the fiercest attacks against the 'ruling class'. Drawings such as the one cynically portraying a skeleton being declared 'fit for war deployment' by a military doctor, or the representation of Christ wearing a gas mask on the cross caused public outrage in the 1920s and harsh criticism of Germany's conduct of the war.

In his autobiography of 1951, Grosz later described himself as someone who was originally quite unpolitical and only got entangled in the wheels of politics during the First World War.<sup>8</sup> His experiences at the Front drove Grosz, like thousands of other soldiers of this time, literally into madness, and thus into the psychiatric institutions behind the Front.<sup>9</sup> The pattern of interplay between experience of the Front and psychiatric treatment here was always the same. The soldiers first reacted personally to the brutalities of the war with increased fear and attention, then with repulsion, and finally with silence and symptoms of madness which could be as severe as suicide or complete apathy.

Since the soldiers needed something to believe in when deployed at the Front in order to survive the loss of orientation, the feeling of senselessness that overwhelmed them during the course of the war did great damage. For them, as for us today, it was almost impossible to distinguish who had succumbed to the greater madness: they themselves, the badly treated patients in the field hospitals, or their superiors who were conducting the war, society, and the political system that gave them their power. For these soldiers the war was characterized by a high degree of absurdity which they were unable

<sup>7</sup> Uwe M. Schneede, *George Grosz: Der Künstler in seiner Gesellschaft* (Cologne, 1975) is an excellent and comprehensive introduction to Grosz's life and work.

<sup>8</sup> George Grosz, *A Small Yes and a Big No* (New York, 1946; new edn. 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Ben Shepard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists 1914-1994* (London, 2000).

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to escape. For them there was only one lesson to be learned from the war – that there should never be war again.<sup>10</sup>

George Grosz was lucky: with the help of influential friends he escaped the murderous treatment methods of war psychiatry at that time. After his release in spring 1915, and then again two years later, after he had been called up again and sent to a psychiatric clinic at the beginning of 1917, he joined the group of Dadaists that was just emerging in Berlin. Like the surrealists in France later on, they declared war on the existing society and its aesthetic forms of expression. The Dadaists tried to counter the madness of war by means of an aesthetics of the absurd. It was based on the realization that existing art had lost all legitimacy, and that a radical rupture with it must therefore be made. What had been regarded as true until then had turned out to be untrue, a lie. Behind the beautiful mask of art an ugly world was concealed, which in Grosz aroused nothing but extreme revulsion. In order to present this he, too, had to break with the inventory of aesthetic expression. From now on, in his search for a new artistic means, he oriented himself to graffiti in public toilets and children's scribbles.

The provocation was successful. After the war Grosz became a celebrated practitioner of a new anti-bourgeois art. Although his accusation against the ruling class called forth furious protests and even a charge of blasphemy, at the same time it aroused admiring recognition and, ultimately, just before Hitler seized power, brought an invitation to New York and with it the opportunity to emigrate. Nonetheless, although externally he had escaped almost certain annihilation, Grosz's worldview remained broken. After the experiences of the First World War, this was perpetuated by his rejection of the Communist Party and his integration into American society in the mid 1920s. After all, America had offered him a home, which the Communists were no longer able to do.

But at the same time the American public no longer understood his art, despite every sympathy with his clear rejection of Germany's authoritarian political system. So Grosz's relationship with his American public also remained broken. After all, here his art was cel-

<sup>10</sup> Ulrich Linse, 'Das wahre Zeugnis: Eine psychohistorische Deutung des Ersten Weltkriegs', in id. (ed.), *Kriegserlebnis: Der Erste Weltkrieg in der literarischen Gestaltung und symbolischen Deutung der Nationen* (Göttingen, 1980), 90–114.

ibrated by the very bourgeois classes against whom this art was originally directed. But, and this is the question we must ask today, was this art ever really made to survive the specific circumstances of its creation? And have we today, a hundred years later, any chance at all of understanding it properly in all its ugliness? It emerged as a time-specific expression of his view of the existing situation. But we have made them into enduring works of art, which today are sold for millions on the international art market. But after all, is this not part of a permissible misunderstanding of Grosz's own artistic intentions?

*Stefan Zweig*

My second example is the writer Stefan Zweig. When war broke out at the end of July 1914, Zweig, as in previous years, was living with his friend Emil Verhaeren in Belgium. Travelling through the Front he just managed to get the last train to reach his home town of Vienna. Though cosmopolitan by origin and upbringing, Zweig initially accepted the war as a great national awakening, like virtually all German artists and scholars of the time. It was only during the course of the following spring that his sympathy turned to antipathy.

What is striking is how this change is reflected in his diaries. For Zweig, writing a diary was always a way of orientating himself to the times. As we know from his early masterpiece *Sternstunden der Menschheit*, he believed in the existence of – often inconspicuous – historical moments when the course of history takes a new direction. According to him, by recognizing these, the attentive observer could look into the future and capture the sense of the historical process as a whole. Diaries were for Zweig like seismographs of history. As soon as he entered a significant period he started writing his entries. And so it was at the beginning of August 1914. Yet six months later he was already tired of it, because he did not see any sense in the course of the war. So he stopped, started again, stopped again, again and again.

But then something new and unexpected happened. Just as political events were deteriorating catastrophically in mid November 1918 and Zweig had returned to his Austrian homeland from Switzerland, he finally stopped writing his diary. The last entry of 13 November explains why:

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The ceasefire concluded, Victor Adler dead, Kaiser Karl deposed—earlier we would have been in turmoil. Now we are just weary. So much has already happened and there is so much still to come. Enough is enough. And I at least expend half my intellectual energy in the terrible visions of these upheavals to come where class hatred will fill this world on a massive scale.<sup>11</sup>

Before this Zweig had already reacted with weariness to the stresses of the war. His lament demonstrates that it was all just too much for him. But now panic seized him. He no longer knew which way the fates would turn and not even his diary could offer any foothold or orientation. The winter of 1918–19 marked for Zweig, quite simply, a collapse of history. It was not until thirteen years later, when the Nazis were on the rise, that he made another attempt.

The rupture in history is quite tangible here. For Zweig the end of the war was an end without any new beginning, without prospect or hope. But with increasing distance from the war, even this rupture took on a different form in his eyes. The collapse of the existing society became a historical caesura, an incision between two epochs, as Zweig described it in his final work, *Die Welt von gestern*, shortly before he committed suicide in exile in Brazil in 1942. More impressively than virtually any other writer of his generation, he depicts in the preface the brokenness of his generation:

Three times they have overthrown my house and existence, cut me off from everything past and hurled me into the abyss with dramatic vehemence. . . . My today is so different from each of my yesterdays . . . my ascents so different from my descents, that it sometimes seems to me that I have not lived just one existence, but several, completely different ones. . . . I have the feeling that the world in which I grew up and the world of today, and the one in between the two, are separating into completely different worlds.

And he said that when he spoke to young people today who did not know the world of yesterday, that is, the world of his youth before the First World War, then he had to agree with them that ‘between

<sup>11</sup> Stefan Zweig, *Tagebücher*, ed. Knut Beck (Frankfurt, 1984), 338.

our today, our yesterday and the day before every bridge has been broken off'.<sup>12</sup>

Since then another world war has come to an end. For democrats and socialists this was again linked with enormous hopes, which this time were not so fundamentally disappointed. Conservative and fascist sections of society, however, experienced an epochal collapse of their previous norms and hopes. Zweig did not live to experience this end, but he anticipated it in the hope that 'future generations would no longer tolerate such a descent into barbarity unknown to fifty previous generations'.

But even if this hope was fulfilled, the question still arises today: did this heal the ruptures in history to which Zweig was exposed? Should we not, in fact, try to remember them in terms of what they were for him: that is, senseless and constantly also hopeless ruptures in the historical process? The openness of the past future, and the annihilation of this future by new historical experiences and expectations is also part of the memory we owe to the past. It is precisely this insight that illustrates the aporias of historical understanding. Although we can imagine another course of history this imagination can never recapture the intensity of reality experienced by contemporaries of the First and Second World Wars.

*Max Scheler*

This brings me to my third and last biography, that of the philosopher Max Scheler. At first glance he does not seem to fit very well into my series of ruptures in history, for Scheler himself never articulated such an experience of his life-perspectives in collapse as reported by Grosz and Zweig, even though he may have felt it. But his life and work point us to another, no less important form of historical rupture: the one between past and present norms and values. It makes us doubt whether we are, in fact, capable at all of adequately understanding past values and images of history.

Of all the innumerable works that glorified the First World War in Germany when it started, Max Scheler's *Der Genius des Krieges und der deutsche Krieg* was one of the most popular. Written in just a few weeks at the end of 1914 in splendid style, it was soon sold out, a sec-

<sup>12</sup> Id., *Die Welt von gestern: Erinnerungen eines Europäers* (1944; new edn. Frankfurt, 1981), 7-9.

ond edition appeared as early as spring 1915, and brought its author wide public recognition. When initial belief in a rapid victory had evaporated in Germany, the author simply turned away from the message of success contained in his book, without ever retracting it.<sup>13</sup>

His argument here was as scandalous as it was demagogic. Its main thrust consisted in the assertion that the right to wage major wars like the present one could never be measured against legal criteria as formulated by international law in the question, for example, as to who had started hostilities or who was the first to violate the territorial integrity of another country. Scheler maintained that the only crucial thing was whether the war was being conducted for a 'grand idea' that affected the intellectual existence of a people, indeed, of humanity as a whole.<sup>14</sup> According to him, whether or not such a war was just was decided not by formal international law, but by God himself. In fact, as far as victory and defeat were concerned here, they were decided by nothing less than a divine ordeal.

We would have to look at the entire breadth of Scheler's argument, which space does not permit me to do here, in order to grasp just how outrageous, how scandalous it was. Indeed, in retrospect, given the outcome of the war, it not only proves to be untenable and positively ridiculous, but also, right from the start, to despise both God and mankind. With incredible arrogance it claims for Germany's intellectual and cultural life a superiority over that of other nations. Britain, for example, is decried as a frivolous haggler concerned only with economic interests, and a cultural gulf between Germany and Russia was asserted, one that could never be bridged.

Nowadays Scheler's argument seems all the more dangerous because key elements of it, for instance, the common feature of the 'chosen people' or the 'superior cultural idea', are still to be found in reasons for going to war today – not so much in Germany, but in other nations. But it has, given today's political morality, become completely unacceptable and as regards its claim to present a reasonable basis for war, it is almost incomprehensible.

So what does it mean, nonetheless, to 'understand' such an argument historically, as Scheler's biographers always claimed to do?<sup>15</sup> It

<sup>13</sup> See Max Scheler, *Gesammelte Werke*, iv. (Munich, 1982), 691–2.

<sup>14</sup> Id., *Der Genius des Krieges und der deutsche Krieg* (Leipzig, 1915), 166.

<sup>15</sup> See John Raphael Staude, *Max Scheler 1874–1928: An Intellectual Portrait* (Toronto, 1967); Wilhelm Mader, *Max Scheler in Selbstzeugnissen und Bild-*

should not really be all that difficult to adopt such a philosophy of war even today. But do we want to? Are we able to? Would this do justice to the experiences of senselessness and absurdity that we saw in the cases of George Grosz and Stefan Zweig; not to mention the catastrophic suffering such a justification of war has brought to many nations in the decades that followed? It is remarkable how rarely later interpreters of Max Scheler's work have contradicted his philosophy of war. Yet in my view, his argument cries out for contradiction: we can, but we should not, understand it.

But if we decide that although we are able to understand this philosophy of war we do not want to do so, then this is not a purely ethical postulate. It also raises questions of historical theory. Are we being fair to Scheler's argument of 1914 if we measure it against the experiences of a later time? To make this even more difficult, we should bear in mind that, after all, in 1914 Scheler could call upon a broad philosophical tradition reaching back at least to Hegel. The vast majority of scholars of his time will certainly have agreed with him. Even a sensitive contemporary such as the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, who in 1912 based his dissertation *Hegel und der Staat* on just such a philosophy, did not realize until the war was under way how untenable and old fashioned Hegel's teleology of history had become.

But what Rosenzweig went through as a philosophical learning process presents an epistemological problem to the historian. So one has to ask once again: should the truth of a philosophical argument be measured against historically variable experiences? The question is: was Scheler's philosophy of war wrong from the start or only once his nationalistic hopes had not been fulfilled? And to put it the other way round: can we today still pass any sort of judgement at all on the relative validity of Max Scheler's argumentation in the winter of 1914 if we accept historical experience as a yardstick for philosophical truths?

What we are dealing with here is not a biographical but a hermeneutic rupture in history: not only a rupture in the political-ethical acceptance of past norms and values, but an aporia of historical *dokumenten* (Hamburg, 1980); Jan H. Nota, *Max Scheler: Der Mensch und seine Philosophie* (Fridingen, 1995). The only explicit critique of Scheler's war rhetoric was expressed by Kurt Flasch, *Die geistige Mobilmachung: Die deutschen Intellektuellen und der Erste Weltkrieg* (Berlin, 2000), 103-5.

understanding per se. And this brings me to the third and final part of my thoughts on historical ruptures in the twentieth century.

### III *The Hermeneutics of Not-Understanding*

Why do we sometimes say that we do not understand someone? There are various possible reasons for this. It could be that we do not share some of his epistemological foundations, for instance, his language or certain signs and symbols that he uses. More important for the historian is another scenario, namely, that we know more than he does about the subject he is talking about. We do not understand, for instance, how in times gone people thought lightning strikes were acts of God, or how on old maps of the world the continents could be drawn in a way that is obviously wrong. It is just as impossible for us to understand how the Nazis could believe in a happy future for Europe based on their racial policy. In all these cases we have to say that today we know better. Our understanding only ever grasps the circumstances of earlier experiences and convictions, never these experiences and convictions themselves.

The last example, however, is exactly what demonstrates that there can be other reasons, namely, moral ones, for not understanding somebody or something. We could, for example, understand the reasons for a murder, but we do not want to because we are afraid that understanding means agreeing with these reasons, making them our own. And in the process something of the deed would transfer itself to us. So understanding someone can also mean sharing his principles and motives, his experiences and moral norms. That is why in our historical understanding we generally restrict ourselves to addressing the reasons and circumstances around the deed. But we do not want to think and act like the perpetrators themselves.

From this we can see that understanding is a social act, that understanding forms a community, which has its own existence in time and space. Applied to history, societies and epochs can be regarded as communities of this sort which share certain norms and experiences. The productive assumption of eighteenth-century historians and philosophers was that such epochal communities exist, in which everything hangs together, one spirit flowing through all things. And, at the same time, the limits of such epochs and societies

are always the limits at which such community ends. Ruptures in history mark them strikingly.

This also applies to the First World War. What was regarded as beautiful, as just, as effective before the war lost this status after the war. Entire sciences and arts, with their established systems of concepts, founding strategies, and inventories of expressions were worn out. Concepts such as 'spirit' and 'reason', 'truth' and 'justice' were seen as polluted, belief in a God who steers the fate of the world as a children's fairytale.<sup>16</sup> And this process of discrediting old norms and knowledge also continued after the Second World War. Since then, concepts such as 'race' and 'Volksgemeinschaft' are regarded in Germany as useless for describing the real state of affairs, despite their great significance before the war, and not only for the Nazis.

This is one of the reasons why after the war many contemporaries partially lost their memory of the time before. Not only did they want to forget their evil deeds, but they were no longer even able to understand how they had willingly supported the war at that time, why they had been cruel to innocent people, and so on. After the rupture in history, what they had done, what they had thought, no longer made any sense to them. Instead of becoming heroes they had become criminals, condemned not only by a hostile society, but often self-condemned as well.

The psychological consequences of addressing their experiences in such a way were far reaching. Many of those who survived the catastrophe developed virtual worlds that established themselves in nightmares and traumas alongside social reality. Cut off from the present, the world of the past survived in the form of parallel universes, comparable to the un-dead, who do not want to die and continue to pursue the living. As psychiatrists we could talk here of a mental illness. But as historians we have to relate such virtual realities to the past from which they have emerged. They emerge – this is my conviction – when the past future has no access to the present past.

It could be argued that all this was not unique to the twentieth century, that similar experiences already existed in earlier centuries. It could even be argued that in the nineteenth century, the age of historicism, this was precisely what was regarded as the actual benefit from studying history, namely, the realization that people only

<sup>16</sup> Flasch, *Die geistige Mobilmachung*.

remember what has survived, what has conquered. But in the twentieth century many contemporaries began to rebel against this sort of philosophy of history. The past experiences of the victims could and should not any longer be so easily forgotten. How did this new ethics of historical recollection come about?

One reason lies in the fact that the victims have pushed themselves more forcibly into memory, and also that in a democratic global community they can no longer be so easily ignored. Another reason, however, is that the perpetrator societies themselves, once they had been made aware of their crimes, began to take an interest in the dark side of their past. Although this often did not happen until the second or the third generation, the global community has formed a collective memory in which far more recollection survives than before of lost social groups, their hopes and ways of life.

This is where a hermeneutics of not-understanding must come into play.<sup>17</sup> Not-understanding in this sense is more than the ambiguity which, according to Gadamer,<sup>18</sup> is inscribed on all understanding, where two people who understand each other still understand something different from each other. In classical hermeneutics going back to Heidegger, what is not understood in the act of understanding always appears incidental. But in the hermeneutics of not-understanding, it is crucial. We must learn to grasp that the norms and logical rules followed by earlier generations were different from ours today. We have to accept that we cannot understand everything that they did and thought, even if we can reconstruct the conditions in which they did all this. If we look at these circumstances in detail, we can even understand how this change in norms came about, even if a residue of creative reaction to the old norms still remains, which no one will ever be able to explain.

Even with the aid of a hermeneutics of not-understanding, of course, the ruined life-chances of past generations cannot be restored. Values and norms, experiences and images of history that have not proved their worth continue to be discredited. A past future that was never to come about remains an illusion. But what such a hermeneutics does do is this: it allows us to stop trying to present something that cannot be understood as understandable in retrospect. In one

<sup>17</sup> Lucian Hölscher, 'Hermeneutik des Nichtverstehens', 227–8.

<sup>18</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd edn. London, 1989).

sentence: ruptures in history must be recognized in historiography as hermeneutic ruptures, not covered up. We owe this just as much to those who lived through past times as we do to our own confrontation with the past.

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