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The embodied past. From paranoid style to politics of memory in South Africa

The post-apartheid period has been marked by a dual relation to memory. On the one hand, the process of reconciliation, nation-building and abolition of the colour line has engaged a definitive rupture with the past. On the other hand, a form of resentment expresses a more ambivalent and painful acknowledgement that the past is still deeply present through racism, inequalities and prejudices. The AIDS crisis both as an objective – the rapid spread of the infection – and subjective phenomenon – the apprehension of the epidemic through controversies – has revealed this duality. Using Thabo Mbeki's statements on the infection, but also on race relations and national commemorations, I try to analyse beyond the obvious paranoid style a politics of memory which unveils hidden truths. The embodiment of the past thus recovered involves both the historical condition, that is the inscription of social structures in bodies and lives, and the experience of history, understood as the elaboration of representations, discourses and narratives accounting for the course of events. Considered in this light, conspiracy theories become not so much fantasies as factual realities, including genocidal projects under apartheid. The recognition of this unfinished business of time is a necessary step in the construction of a common future.

Key words embodiment, resentment, political anthropology, AIDS, South Africa

What matters to me is the mental state of the victim. My contribution will be an analysis of resentment founded on introspection. The task I intend to do is to justify a state of mind condemned jointly by moralists and psychologists: the former make it a stain, the latter a kind of illness. This state of mind is mine. I must therefore accept to bear the social stain and assume the illness as part of my personality in order to try to legitimize it. Resentment as an existential dominant feature of my kind: this is the result of a long personal and historical evolution. (Améry 1995)

Introduction

On 12 October 2001, South African President Thabo Mbeki gave a conference at the University of Fort Hare for the celebration of the centenary of Z.K. Matthews' birth.¹

1 The full text of the address can be found at <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2001/011016442p1001.htm> (accessed 18 August 2007).

Legacy of the segregationist system, the University had been inaugurated in 1916 as the South African Native College, exclusively dedicated to Black students. As racial oppression grew, it soon turned into a centre of intellectual resistance to the White regime, and later became the Academy for African political leaders. Z.K. Matthews, who was the first African to obtain a BA degree in South Africa, was appointed in 1936 at Fort Hare, where he became professor of African Studies. He had to go into exile in 1959 after he was acquitted during the infamous Treason trial, which was organised in 1956 against 156 persons, including Nelson Mandela, charged with conspiracy. Thabo Mbeki thus evoked Z.K. Matthews' academic and political involvement as an African, drawing a parallel with North American pioneer of the Black cause, W.E.B. Du Bois. He went on to affirm that these two intellectuals had refuted by their own career the common idea in South Africa, as well as in the United States, that University was developing an inadequate elite of 'mis-educated Negroes or Natives' who would betray their own people by adopting the White model and renouncing their own values.

But as he proceeded in his address, the South African President suddenly left the past for the present and the praise for the polemic:

Yet, he said, there are still some in our midst who would rather that they remain 'mis-educated Negroes or Natives'. There are those, among us, who have been taught from books of the same racist bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by Negroes of enslaved minds. These have studied in schools of theology where the Bible is interpreted by those, among us, who have justified segregation; law schools where they are told that they belong to the most criminal element in the country; medical schools where they are likewise convinced of their inferiority by being reminded of their role as germ carriers; schools where they learn a history that pictures black people as human beings of the lower order, unable to subject passion to reason.

Referring more explicitly to interpretations of the AIDS epidemic on the African continent publicly exposed by scientists, physicians and politicians during the two previous decades, he added:

And thus does it happen that others who consider themselves to be our leaders take to the streets carrying their placards to demand that, because we are germ carriers and human beings of a lower order that cannot subject its passion to reason, we must perforce adopt strange opinions to save a depraved and diseased people from perishing of self-inflicted disease. Convinced that we are but natural-born promiscuous, unique in the world, they proclaim that our continent is doomed to an inevitable mortal end because of our unconquerable devotion to the sin of lust.

This virulent attack was immediately denounced by the liberal media and the political opposition as the persisting expression of an intolerable racism at the head of the State and as the latest evidence of the President's psychological fragility.² In fact, to many it appeared either as purely irrational, with its surrealistic vocabulary recalling Stalinist-style denunciations, or as merely instrumental to divert the South African Black

2 Among others, one can mention the journalist Drew Forrest in the *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 26 October 2001. I have given elsewhere a detailed presentation of the context of this speech, of the present controversies around AIDS and their inscription in the past of segregation (Fassin 2007a).

constituency from supposedly more important problems. Very few observers thought there might be both sincerity and pertinence in this somewhat forced evocation of history. Very few indeed considered this speech and its strange happening in a serious way.

Making sense of the past

My intention here is precisely to take Thabo Mbeki's political performance seriously, that is not only for its exotic form, but for its *paranoid matter*. Here I must clarify my use of this adjective. In a classical paper published about McCarthyism, which brought a broader picture of conspiracy theories in history, political scientist Richard Hofstadter wrote:

I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind. I am not speaking in a clinical sense. In fact the idea of a paranoid style as a force in politics would have little value if it were applied only to men with profoundly disturbed minds. It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant. Of course this term is pejorative, and it is meant to be. But nothing really prevents a sound program or demand from being advocated in the paranoid style. (1964: 77)

In the present case, my perspective is obviously not psychopathological or evaluative: it is neither a clinical qualification nor a moral disqualification of the South African President. It is purely descriptive: I want to underline the inflation of themes involving suspicion and accusation, the references to racism and evocations of threats, the violent tone and hyperbolic form in public discourse – not only in Thabo Mbeki's speech at Fort Hare. Of these excesses in language I will give illustrations later.

The situations in which these excesses occur all have in common a dealing with the past of the country or, more precisely, the sort of truth it reveals in the present. In his analysis, Richard Hofstadter develops this point in a direction I want to somewhat distance myself from. 'Style has more to do with the way in which ideas are believed than with the truth or falsity of their content', he correctly remarks in his seminal paper. But after having given several past as well as present illustrations of the paranoid style in the Western world, he writes:

A distinguished historian has said that one of the most valuable things about history is that it teaches us how things do *not* happen. It is precisely this kind of awareness that the paranoid fails to develop. We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well.

I retain the felicitous formulation that 'we are all sufferers from history', but I believe that the question of the relation to historical truth is much more complex and ambiguous than it is said here. The frontier between 'reality' and 'fantasy' is often blurred and this is precisely what makes the difference between the paranoid style and the paranoid personality, on the one hand, and what makes the paranoid style so powerful for its users and their audience, on the other. The South African experience of history illustrates how

uncertain the limit between truth and error is and more profoundly, as we will see, how problematic the notion of truth may be.

To explore this uncertain and problematic domain, the distinction proposed by Michel de Certeau (1987: 99) between the 'two strategies of time' proves to be illuminating, even though it has not aroused the interest it should have.³ 'Psychoanalysis and historiography have two different manners to display the space of memory', he writes.

They think differently the relation between past and present. The former recognises one *into* the other, the latter puts one *next to* the other. Psychoanalysis treats this relation in terms of imbrication (one in the place of the other), of repetition (one reproduces the other under another form), of equivoque (what is for what?). Historiography considers this relation in terms of succession (one after the other), of correlation (more or less close to each other), of consequence (one follows the other) and of disjunction (one or the other, but not both at the same time). The two strategies of time thus clash although they are developed on similar issues. (de Certeau 1987)

Clearly enough, the French historian's preference goes to psychoanalysis as a way of exploring the past and enriching our understanding of memory. Even though it is not my method either at the individual level (to approach the President's personality) or at the collective level (to account for South Africa's link to its history), I argue it may be heuristic to think the relation between past and present as continuous and ambiguous, to apprehend memory as a living link between past and present.

This perspective has been obliterated by an important literature which has followed Pierre Nora's success on the 'places of memory'. Contrary to what is often thought, the 5000 pages of the seven volumes published between 1984 and 1992 do not represent so much a celebration of the past – in fact, it would be more correct to talk of celebration of the nation and its claimed values – as a disqualification of memory. The introduction leaves no doubt about it:

Because it is affective and magic, memory only accepts details which comfort it; it is nourished with vague, global, confused, floating, particular, symbolic souvenirs affected by all sorts of transfers, screens, censures, projections. Because it is an intellectual operation of secularization, history calls for analysis and critique. Memory installs the souvenir in the sacred whereas history drives it out to make it prosaic. (Nora 1997: 23–5)

And he concludes: 'Memory is always suspect to history, the main mission of which is to destroy and repress it'. This definitive condemnation of memory in the name of history has for corollary its reification through which the historian reproduces in his text the disembodiment of memory that he diagnoses in the social world: the 'places of memory', whether material or immaterial, are these sites of commemoration which proliferate to bury souvenirs at the very moment they are supposed to consecrate them: 'We speak so

3 Recent explorations of memory have mainly followed two paths: one which refers in a literal approach or in a metaphorical sense to its psychological inscription as trauma; the other which discredits as merely subjective or purely unfounded efforts to call for the revaluation of past sufferings. A critical discussion of both lines of research can be found in the book I wrote with Richard Rechtman (2007).

much of memory only because we have no more of it'. And even: 'Everything we call memory today is not memory but already history. All that we call outburst of memory is the accomplishment of its disappearance in the flames of history'. The point I want to argue is that memory is not only alive and well – as many social movements for the recognition, celebration or compensation of slavery and colonialism, of genocides and crimes against humanity demonstrate all over the world – but also that it tells us a profound truth – not of the kind historiography is searching for when it attempts to reconstitute the past but about facts of our history which are forgotten, repressed, minimised, distorted, reinvented.

In fact one could assert that in South Africa today the main political issue is how to make sense of history as inscribed in memory.⁴ Thus there is no sense in opposing history to memory as truth to error, or even as objectification to subjectivity. Memory of the past belongs to the history of the present. That is what anthropology teaches us. It is thus the South African *politics of memory* I want to analyse here. In his work on the metamorphoses of our understanding of memory, Ian Hacking (1995: 210–11) distinguishes two 'politics of memory': one is 'communal' and plays 'a major role in group identity' based on founding events, such as in monuments and rituals which evoke the Holocaust; the other is 'personal' and has to do with 'claims of knowledge' about individual traces of the past, such as in the recognition of trauma among victims of sexual violence. Here, I want to situate the politics of memory at the intersection of the communal and the personal. When the South African President links past and present in his speeches, he does it both as an individual who is deeply marked by his own story and as a member of a group who forges its identity through the affirmation of its history.

The relation between memory and history, as the ethnologist apprehends it in his field, I propose to call *embodiment of the past*. By this expression, which obviously underlines the corporeal presence of memory rather than its immaterial reality as it is often done, I mean the way in which individual trajectories and collective histories are transcribed into individual and collective bodies, in terms of affects and emotions, disease and comfort, mourning and pleasure. In other words, it is the way through which social structures and norms inscribed in the long term of historical changes impose themselves on men and women, both in their everyday existence and in the meaning they give to their life and actions. Obviously Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (1945), which brings the body proper as the immediate presence to the world, and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus (1980), which allows a conceptual framework to consider the production and reproduction of inequalities, give analytical antecedents to this concept, which has been developed by Thomas Csordas (1990) in the religious context of charismatic movements in the United States and by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) in her political approach of disease and death in Brazil.

However, I would like to broaden the perspective, firstly by including also the collective dimension of the social body in a Durkheimian vein, secondly by reinforcing the historical dimension of cultural processes as Elias develops them. The concept of

4 Of course, South Africa has not escaped the global trend of commemoration of the past – or one should say of its multiple and conflictive past, since the Vortreeker Monument to the glory of the Afrikaners in Pretoria coexists today with the Museum of Apartheid as a testimony about White domination in Soweto. I have proposed an analysis of the museographic representation of history (Fassin 2007b).

embodied past is therefore meant to be a contribution to the more general problematic of a performative social order. Paraphrasing Austin (1962), one could risk the following formulation: how to do bodies with worlds. More concretely, the embodiment of the past is a two-sided phenomenon. The first side is objective. It is the physical mark left by history in terms of deterioration, wearing, fatigue, illness, violence. When I was doing research in Ecuador, I remember the appearance of these young Indian women who seemed twenty years older than urban women at the same age, but I also recall the way they humbly bowed down when they saw White people as they had learnt to do through generations: not only was it the consequence of immediate poverty but the lasting effect of historical oppression. The second side is subjective. It is the psychic trace left by memory in terms of the interpretation of the social world and its course, in terms of individual and collective narratives reconstituting local truths. Again, in my fieldwork in the Andes, I was impressed by the tragic imaginary of extermination of the Indians aroused by governmental interventions in family planning or cancer screening as well as by stories of villagers fleeing as they saw the hygiene teams coming during the cholera epidemic or of women referring to babies born with intra-uterine devices stuck into their brains: these horrific fantasies had their roots in the realities of their historical oppression. One can call the first topics *historical condition* by contrast with the somewhat ahistorical human condition defined by Hannah Arendt (1958): it is about the social structures inscribed in the long and short temporalities. One may designate the second topics as *experience of history* in reference to Reinhart Koselleck (1997): it is about the cultural apprehension of the course of events in which lives are caught. There is no discontinuity between the two, since the historical condition informs the experience of history and reciprocally the latter gives its meaning to the former.

Scenes of verbal violence

Let us get back to Thabo Mbeki's address at the University of Fort Hare and inscribe it in its national context. South Africa's way out of apartheid has been depicted as miraculously peaceful – which it has been. After 250 years of colonial oppression followed by almost a century of racial segregation concluded by 46 years of legalised White supremacy, the 1994 first democratic elections were held in a climate of extreme tension, not only between anti-apartheid activists and apartheid authorities, but also between the recently authorised African National Congress and the Inkhata Freedom Party, then engaged in alliances with ultra-right organisations. The civil war which everybody feared, as outbursts of violence had occurred in KwaZulu-Natal and Soweto, was avoided. A national union government was formed associating yesterday's enemies under Nelson Mandela's leadership. This radical change opened a new era based on the ambitious project of rebuilding the nation beyond the colour line and reconstructing the state divided in four racial sets of separated institutions. Archbishop Desmond Tutu launched the consensual slogan of the 'Rainbow Nation' to symbolise this universalistic aspiration and President Nelson Mandela called for a 'Moral Renewal' to accelerate the necessary reforms of every social sector. During two years, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission held its public hearings all over the country to investigate gross violations of human rights committed between 1960 and 1994: over 20,000 statements by victims were recorded and 7,000 criminals were granted amnesty after full disclosure of their

offences. This national enterprise of political confession orchestrated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu led to the construction of an official truth about the past based on testimonies and avowals and to the long-awaited promise of financial reparations for those who had suffered from the racist regime. Through this collective exorcism conducted in the religious spirit of a 'born again' society, the wounds of the past were to be healed and the country was to turn towards its future. At least some, especially in the White minority, thought so. However for many, notably in the Black majority, the past was still alive in the present, thus obliterating the future.

The coming to power of Thabo Mbeki, who became President after the second general elections in 1999, marked a turning point. If, as Tom Lodge (2002: 2) writes, for Nelson Mandela, 'the past is another country', meaning that he has formally broken with his traditional origins, for his successor, conversely, one could say that he has made the past his intellectual land. Most of his public speeches are based on historical references, not simply as rhetorical ornaments but as analytical instruments.⁵ The famous 'I am an African', pronounced in front of the Constitutional Assembly in 1996, is a long psalmody evoking all the peoples that have formed contemporary South Africa, from 'the Khoi and the San' to 'the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land', and serves 'to refuse that our Africanness shall be defined by our race, colour, gender or historical origins', but rather by a community of destiny marked by 'the dismal shame of poverty, suffering and human degradation'. However, the evocation of history soon becomes a manner to stigmatise the persisting violence and injustice of the past into the present as the statement entitled 'South Africa: Two Nations' at the opening of the debate on reconciliation at the National Assembly in 1998 clearly recalls, opposing one nation which is 'white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender and geographical dispersal' and the other one 'larger, black and poor, with the worst affected being women in the rural areas', denouncing 'the perpetuation of the racial, gender and spatial disparities born of a very long period of colonial and apartheid white minority domination' and finally asserting that 'the objective of national reconciliation is not being realised'. Beyond this brief exegesis of Presidential speeches, the change of political leadership and of discursive style at the end of the decade actually reflects a profound change in the relation of the South African society to its past. The enchantment of the immediate after-1994 years has given way to the disillusion which will grow during the second decade of democracy. To use Reinhart Koselleck's 'historical categories' (1990: 307), whereas the perspective of a future beyond racism had been the 'horizon of expectation' in the first period – thus repressing the evocations of the past – the 'field of experience' soon became that of a persisting imprint of history in everyday life relations and discourses. One can designate as *post-apartheid* – in a thick sense rather than in its common use – the end of the past regime which however remains present beyond its disappearance, both in the lasting inequalities inherited from the apartheid era (the historical condition) and in the expression of frustrations systematically interpreted as related to the remnants of apartheid (the experience of history). No event has brought more evidence of it than the AIDS epidemic.

In the late 1980s, scientists, in South Africa as elsewhere in the world, were wondering why this region was spared the disease which had so severely affected

5 The speeches mentioned can be found on the website of the South African government (<http://www.go.za>), but also in Thabo Mbeki's biography by Adrian Hadland and Jovial Rantao (1999).

the rest of the continent, especially Central and Eastern Africa, and were proposing hypotheses about the lower virulence of the virus or the different exposure to risk. One decade later, the country was considered as the most affected on the planet, with almost five million people infected. In 1990, the seroprevalence rate among pregnant women was 0.7%. In 2000, it reached a peak of 24.5% at a national level and even 36.2% in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Statistical projections suggested that life expectancy could drop by twenty years between 1990 and 2010.⁶ Certainly everybody recalled Chris Hani's warning at the 1990 Maputo Conference, when the exiled ANC leader had announced that after having won the fight against apartheid, the next challenge for South Africa would be AIDS. But nobody could imagine that the epidemic would have such an extension and intensity in so little time. The tragedy of the situation was even increased by the fact that the spread of the disease seemed exponentially related to the advent of democracy, a coincidence Thabo Mbeki noted in his letter to 'world leaders' in April 2000.

This letter, in which the South African President explained and justified his heterodox position on the epidemic to his fellows heads of state Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac, among others, revealed to an international audience a controversy⁷ that had been preceded by a series of scandals (Schneider 2002). It all started in 1996 with the so-called 'Sarafina II saga', in which the health department was accused of not having followed the legal procedure in the decision to finance a musical which was supposed to disseminate preventive messages to the population. It went on in 1997 with the announcement by the cabinet of a revolutionary treatment 'Virodene', the experimentation of which received financial support from the state against the advice of technical committees, and which ultimately appeared to be a toxic industrial solvent. It developed in 1998 with the critiques directed by the government against multinational pharmaceutical companies accused of taking excessive profits from antiretroviral drugs which poor countries could not afford. And it ended in 1999 with the disclosure of the links the newly elected president had with dissident scientists from California campuses: basing his own analysis on heterodox theories which had their hour of glory in the late 1980s but had been abandoned and even rejected since, he stated during his opening speech at the Thirteenth International Conference held in Durban in July 2000 that 'we could not blame everything on a single virus' and that poverty and malnutrition were to be considered as the main cause of the epidemic on the African continent; in other circles, he went as far as to incriminate antiretroviral medicines, which he said were ineffective and dangerous, thus following the dissidents' argument that people did not die of AIDS but of their treatments. That same year a clinical trial with nevirapine, which had recently been recommended by international experts for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission, was interrupted in South Africa after the death of several women involved in the clinical experimentation. A few months later, the Treatment Action Campaign, a consortium of AIDS activist organisations, took a court action against the government: that started a long series of judiciary episodes until the final

6 These data come from the following sources: Department of Health (2000) and Dorrington *et al.* (2001).

7 The letter was supposed to remain secret – at least this is what I was told by the medical officer of an international agency who 'confidentially' handed it to me . . . But it also came into the possession of a *Washington Post* journalist who published it a few days later. I have analysed elsewhere this letter and the opening speech Thabo Mbeki gave for the Thirteenth International AIDS Conference (2002).

sentence, which condemned the health department to immediately implement medical programmes in April 2002.

As the polemics grew, their tone became increasingly violent. Progressively a *semantic configuration* took shape in the public debate.⁸ It associated three main dimensions. The first one was nationalism, alternatively to be heard in a strict sense by reference to the South African nation or in a broader acceptance of a belonging to the African culture: Sarafina II had been presented as an African adaptation of prevention programmes; Virodene became the symbol of the creativity of African scientists denied by the Western world and was later replaced in the experimental pharmacopoeia by diverse highly praised local products such as the African potato; conversely, AZT and other antiretroviral drugs were seen as symbols of global capitalism ill-adapted to African specificities. The second element was racialism, understood as the systematic interpretation of conflicts in racial terms which amplified with years: opponents during the Sarafina II saga were merely accused of racist overtones in the debate; critiques of Virodene were later interpreted as the evidence that it was because patients were mostly Blacks that experimentation was not allowed; and multinational drug companies were finally accused of abandoning African populations to their fate by only giving them ineffective, dangerous and costly medicines. The third feature was conspiracy, whose presumed authors changed with time in the government's discourse: during Sarafina II, national opponents soon joined by AIDS activists were suspected; with Virodene, the scope of enemies broadened to medical doctors and scientists; when AZT became the target of the president's attacks, the plot was redefined as global with alternatively the Western world, the White community or the international capital at its head; in its extreme, although anecdotal expression, the Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang was said to have distributed to her provincial colleagues a booklet written by a former CIA agent who related the assassination of J.F. Kennedy and the spread of the AIDS epidemic to secret societies operating in the United States. The combination of nationalism, racialism and conspiracy may be qualified as a paranoid semantic configuration. All three dimensions are deeply embedded in a historical argumentation: the past is always convened to justify nationalism, explain racialism and interpret conspiracy. Apartheid – and beyond, segregation, oppression and even colonisation – is the permanent and explicit background of the controversies.

The style associated with this semantic configuration includes extreme accusatory rhetoric. During the debate around Virodene, Health Minister Nkosazana Zuma declared that if the opposition representatives 'had their way, we would all die of AIDS', meaning: we, the African people. But symmetrically accusing the government, Medical Research Council Chair Malegapuru William Makgoba talked of 'genocide' and Supreme Court Judge Edwin Cameron 'a Holocaust'.⁹ In short, the language of extermination has become an ordinary – almost normal – manner to talk about politics. I have heard it expressed as a commonplace in intellectual spheres as well as in townships

8 I have proposed to designate as semantic configuration 'a set of notions which are constructed together, respond to each other and complement each other to account for social reality'. It characterises the 'ethos' of a specific moment and of a cultural context (Fassin 2006).

9 The government has even been threatened with a trial for genocide by satirist Pieter-Dirk Huys. See 'Probe Manto and Mbeki for genocide', *Sapa*, 23 February 2003; Edwin Cameron, 'AIDS denial and Holocaust denial', Edward Smith lecture, Harvard Law School, 8 April 2003, <http://ww2.aegis.org/news/dmg/2003/MG030410.html>; and Malegapuru William Makgoba's interview, *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 6 October 2000.

discussions. In this lexical context, Thabo Mbeki's paranoid style at Fort Hare appears a little less dystonic in the concert of arguments heard in the public sphere. Its only singularity resides in its politics of memory: in his speech, as in many Black leaders', historical references are omnipresent, the past being used as a clue for the present; for most his opponents the accusations are ahistorical.

Truths without reconciliation

Memory generally leaves its imprint much deeper when it is made of violence and oppression: the more painful the historical condition, the more acute the experience of history. This is why so often, when subjection or war is over, the victor and the dominant find it easier to forget than the vanquished and the dominated, to use Walter Benjamin's analytic distinction (1968). Surely in South Africa there has been no war and the reconciliation process has avoided the division between victors and vanquished (apartheid chief of state Frederik De Klerk participated in the 1994 national union government under the presidency of Nelson Mandela who was the iconic victim of apartheid). And certainly there has been subjection under White supremacy rule, but yesterday's dominated remain for the most part today's under privileged (this is the sense of Thabo Mbeki's Two Nations speech, which nevertheless underestimates the role of present African elites in the reproduction of class inequalities). However, the strength of the imposition of the colour line during the previous regime makes the model of a racial division in the historical condition and the experience of history still relevant. 'You cannot understand because you're white', replied the health minister to a medical doctor in a discussion as she run out of arguments. One cannot say more accurately the 'unspeakability' of this barrier.

In South Africa, Black physicians told me how they had been segregated, despised, humiliated and ignored all their life, even by their White colleagues at work, and how almost overnight, after the 1994 elections, they started to be treated as citizens and friends – as if nothing ever happened, they would say. From then on their colleagues would expect them to leave the past aside and look towards the future. However, for them things were not so simple. As the director of the AIDS National Programme, Dr Nono Simelela, once expressed it in a conference where she had been harshly attacked by activists and even accused, once more, of 'Holocaust against the poor' in front of an academic audience: 'In this country the average white person has always known freedom. As far as I am concerned, I went to bed one night with no right and I woke up the next morning as a free person. But we still have to deal with the legacy of the previous regime'. What she explicitly mentioned was the legacy of inequality she had to fight as a public servant and that made her task as a public health administrator so difficult (the historical condition); but what she implicitly suggested was also the legacy of humiliation she had been confronted with all her life and had to bear once more in front of this aggressive audience (the experience of history). Most of those I talked to did not understand what she had meant and simply considered this personal remark as being out of place. It is these political – racial would be too reductionist – tensions of history that the AIDS epidemic simultaneously revealed and reawakened.

Most studies carried out on AIDS in South Africa testify to a remarkable 'presentism' as François Hartog (2003) characterises what he sees as the privileged

regime of historicity in contemporary societies. Exceptions are few, such as Shula Marks' article (2002), which enlightens the historical condition accounting for the rapid spread of the epidemic and Virginia van der Vliet's text (2001), which recalls the context of the experience of history around AIDS. In fact, as on the rest of the continent a decade earlier,¹⁰ the same behavioural and cultural interpretations were given. On the one hand, 'sexual promiscuity' was commonly invoked in the political circles of apartheid leaders during the first years of the epidemic. 'Promiscuity is the greatest danger. There is no way one can say: I still want to sleep around, but I don't want to get AIDS', said Health Minister Willie van Niekerk in 1987, echoed by his successor Rina Venter: 'The problem of AIDS is not primarily a medical problem. It relates to social behaviour'. In the same period French historian of medicine Mirko Grmek (1989: 274) could write: 'An extreme promiscuity is the only element African heterosexuals have in common with homosexuals through whom the AIDS epidemic began in America. In African towns, overpopulation comes with overcopulation'. Still in the 1999 annual report published by the United Nations Population Fund and much inspired by the South African situation, one finds the argument that 'the problem is promiscuity' completed by the following explanation: 'Traditional cultures had strict rules governing sexual relationships. Those codes have broken down and nothing has replaced them'.¹¹ On the other hand, precisely, 'cultural features' are searched for to account for a supposedly specific national situation. In its exotic form, it is the 'virgin-cleansing myth', which presumes that older men would rape young girls believing they would thus get rid of their infection. Although there has been no ethnological evidence found of this belief, it has been a success story not only locally but also internationally, as demonstrated in this statement from a French newspaper: 'The cost of treatment and cultural tradition prevent the epidemic from being halted in Africa, where medicine men prescribe to penniless patients to make love with virgins to purify themselves from the virus'. In its mundane expression, South African idiosyncrasy is seen in the high rates of rapes, and journalist Charlene Smith went as far as to characterise her country as a 'society of rapists', clearly associating 'culture', 'tradition' and again 'sexual promiscuity'. In his public response to her interview in an American magazine, Thabo Mbeki accused her of 'racist rage'.¹² It is this combination of behavioural and culturalist interpretations that the South African President evokes in his apparently misplaced comments in Fort Hare.

An alternative approach of the epidemic is indeed possible, which incorporates the historical condition of South African populations. Let us consider the epidemiological survey conducted by Brian Williams and his colleagues (2000) in the mining town of Carletonville in the Rand. Seroprevalence rates for HIV reach 29% among miners, 37% among women living in the nearby township, and 69% for prostitutes working in the so-called hot spots. Contrarily to the mundane discourse on 'sexual promiscuity',

10 When the epidemic was first recognised in Central and Western Africa in the early 1980s, two sorts of interpretations were looked for. Some mentioned the 'hyper-sexuality' of Africans, either as a fact of their nature or as a consequence of modernity and urbanism. Others searched for 'traditional' explanations such as the use of scarifications or the practice of rituals involving blood exchange. Gilles Bibeau (1991) has given an analysis of these prejudices, which I described in the context of Togo and Burkina Faso with Jean-Pierre Dozon (1989).

11 Excerpts are taken from Grundlingh (2001), UNFPA (1999) and Grmek (1989).

12 References come from Leclerc-Madlala (2002), Colombani (1999), Smith (2000) and 'Mbeki versus Leon' (2000).

the study shows that if 50% of women in the township who declare having had three partners in their life are infected, this figure is still 35% for two partners and as high as 22% for only one partner. These findings are confirmed by multi-sited research conducted in other places in sub-Saharan Africa, which demonstrated no statistical relation between seroprevalence rates and sexual activity.¹³ In fact, to understand the spread of the epidemic around the mines, it is necessary to go back to the development of the mining industry at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.

As Randall Packard (1987) has analysed in the case of tuberculosis, the concentration of men near the pits in overcrowded compounds facilitated the propagation of disease which was eventually disseminated in the rural areas as workers were dismissed when sick and sent back to their families. The situation was even more serious in the case of sexually transmitted infections including AIDS, since the development of bars and the coming of women around the miners' hostels, of which Mamphela Ramphele (1993) gave a vivid picture, has fuelled the epidemics which have further spread to villages when men came home. Thus in this particular context, rather than refer to behavioural or cultural paradigms, we must consider the political economy of the disease from the perspective of the organisation of the mine and its consequences on the affective relations and sexual risks, as Paul Farmer (1992) did for Haiti with labour migrations, sexual tourism and blood traffic in the light of 'colonialism' and 'imperialism' which weighed so heavily on the country's past. In the South African industrial world – and as also true at a smaller scale in the agricultural sector, which has been increasingly organised on an industrial model – AIDS is a historical condition in the sense that social structures historically produced and reproduced are inscribed in bodies according to the colour and class lines.

A parallel path may be followed as far as the experience of history is concerned. Here it is no more the objective – although often invisible – trace of the past which is at work but the subjective – and nevertheless quite concrete – imprint it leaves in representations and discourses. Certainly AIDS has been a remarkably fertile ground for rumours and fantasies which, as Karen Kroeger argues in her study in Indonesia, are 'more than just right or wrong information; they are socially constructed, performed and interpreted narratives' (2003: 243). In South Africa maybe more than anywhere else, it has taken a tragic turn with the spectre of extermination, which soon appeared in private discussion and public spheres, under the form either of a passive process or of an active intervention. In Alexandra and Soweto, Johannesburg's largest townships, I heard both versions. In the former, it went: 'Most people with HIV are unskilled, uneducated, unemployed. We are unskilled, uneducated, unemployed. How will the government benefit from us? The more numerous we are, the more problems we cause. If they can get rid of us, there will be less employment, less crimes. Let them die'. In the latter, it was: 'It's like this other doctor who drew blood from black patients and injected oranges so that it must be supplied to black communities and then started spreading like that. I would not know that I am HIV positive because I am eating oranges. And I pass it to my partner, that's how many people got it'. These conspiratorial schemes are not very different from what Charles Briggs (2004) described for the cholera epidemic in Venezuela, where Indian

13 At the 'ecological level', that is when one compares different cities or neighbourhoods, there is no statistical association between seroprevalence rates observed and sexual activity declared; however, logically, at the 'individual level', that is when one compares persons with various sexual activity in the same place, such statistical association is found. See Buvé *et al.* (2001).

curers and activists talked of a governmental plot. Most of the time they are considered either as mere imaginary discourses or as metaphorical representations: they tell us something of the past or of the present in a figurative sense. I would like to envisage the South African case in a literal sense, that is, from the perspective of policies which were actually based on criminal intentions and of plots which were effectively conceived, if not carried out. I do not mean that the extermination of African populations was on its way, but I want to suggest that the South African public sphere has been saturated for the last two decades with information about genocidal projects dreamt of or even conceived.

During the last years of apartheid, Conservative and National Parties representatives accused each other of not implementing effective programmes against AIDS because they were rejoicing in its potential consequences for the African population. 'The epidemic will succeed where our policies have failed, that is in turning the Black people into a minority', some of them would publicly say. But in fact extermination was not only a chimerical delirium of a few ultra right Afrikaners: it also became the working programme of a secret operation named 'Project Coast'. This is what the last hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission revealed in 1998. It gave rise to the opening of a new file for the 668 pages of the Chemical and Biological Warfare Hearings. A physician, Wouter Basson, popularly designated as 'Doctor Death', was the main character of the plot which has been reported in detail by Marlene Burger and Chandré Gould (2002). He developed with his colleagues a series of researches on themes as various as a 'super wolf-dog' or a 'contraceptive aimed specifically at the black population', the bacterial agents of cholera and of anthrax, which were both utilised against enemies, and among others HIV. However, it is another secret project, the *Vlakplaas*, discovered in the same period during the trial of its director, Colonel Eugene De Koch, which brought conspiratorial fears to their peak when one learnt that HIV-positive soldiers had been used to infect prostitutes in African brothels with the hope that they would in turn disseminate the disease. That neither of the projects was carried through does not prevent representations and discourses from being contaminated by these genocidal ideas, which have nourished the news but also everyday discussions for several years. Wouter Basson's trial only ended in 2004 – what is more, he was triumphantly acquitted by a judge known to be an apartheid nostalgic, a fact that confirmed for many of the persons I met in the townships the existence of a persisting conspiracy.

While the consensual and soothing narratives of nation building were being patiently constructed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, horrifying stories thus circulated, partially exposed by the courts, often dramatised by the media, and ultimately transformed in rumours that exaggerated or aggregated the original versions. It is in this contrasted context that one can understand the success of conspiratorial theories as a counterpoint to the official history coming out of the hearings. Of course, taking literally the conspiratorial theories does not mean that they should be reduced to a sort of factual reality – the one which emerges through testimonies, avowals and sometimes sentences. The sort of truth that narratives of conspiracy reveal is more complex as George Marcus (1999) means when he uses the oxymoron 'paranoia within reason'. In South Africa, beyond the evidence-based plots that were discovered by the different forms of justice done in the various courts and arenas, these truths are ambivalent and contradictory, showing that it is not so easy to get rid of the past. Ironically, talking of 'rainbowism', to caricature Desmond Tutu's idealistic formulation

of the post-apartheid project, Thabo Mbeki meant, in his response to the critiques he had received after the 'Two nations' speech, that there remained truths which admitted no reconciliation.

Conclusion

Beginning his speech upon the return of Saartje Baartman's remains on 9 August 2002, the South African President recalled the suffering of the so-called 'Hottentot Venus', whose body had been exhibited as a fairground curiosity in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century and ended in Paris on Cuvier's dissection table from where her preserved genitals were displayed in the Musée de l'Homme:

We cannot undo the damage that was done to her. But at least we can summon the courage to speak the naked but healing truth that must comfort her wherever she may be. I speak of courage because there are many in our country who urge constantly that we should not speak of the past. They pour scorn on those who speak about who we are, where we come from and why we are what we are today. They make bold to say the past is no longer, and all what remains is a future that will be.

Once more the past becomes instrumental for the present. But this time it is to denounce those who too quickly want to turn the page and who criticise him precisely for always referring to history. What the AIDS epidemic has taught us is that the past does not pass so easily – at least for those who have suffered from it.

In the powerful introduction he wrote to John Kani's famous play, 'Nothing but the Truth', the great South African novelist Zakes Mda comments on his own experience of contemporary politics of memory in almost the same terms:

There is a demand from some of my compatriots, since we have now attained democracy, we should all have collective amnesia, because memory does not contribute to reconciliation. Our new identity-in-the-making is threatened by memory. We should therefore not only forgive the past, we should also forget it. However, it is impossible to meet this demand because we are products of our past. We have been shaped by our history. (2002: viii–ix)

This is what I have tried to argue by saying that our historical condition is the foundation of our experience of history. It is remarkable that the same reproach addressed to those who remember racial segregation and political oppression in South Africa should be opposed to those who, in other parts of the world, and most notably in France, remember other afflictions, from slave trade to colonial domination: as Achille Mbembe (2005) observes, they are disqualified in the name of ahistorical and universalistic values which reflect the 'difficulty to imagine history and memory as history and memory of responsibility'. To these critiques we can answer, in Wole Soyinka's words (1999), that there is a time to recognise the 'burden of memory' before the 'muse of forgiveness' may accomplish her work.

Moving a step further, we may even add, with Jean Améry (1995), that however unpleasant it is to acknowledge it, 'the man of resentment cannot strike up this cry of peace hurled in unison around him enjoining him not to look backward but forward,

towards a better future – towards a shared future’. After all, social scientists do not have to make us feel comfortable and the least we can expect from them is to tell us how things are rather than how we would like them to be.

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Résumé

Le post-apartheid a été marqué par un double rapport à la mémoire. D'une part, le processus de réconciliation, d'édification nationale et d'abolition de la ligne de couleur a engagé une rupture définitive avec le passé. D'autre part, une forme de ressentiment exprime la réalité ambivalente et douloureuse d'un passé toujours profondément présent à travers le racisme, les inégalités, les préjugés. La crise du sida, en tant que phénomène objectif – l'extension rapide de l'infection – et subjectif – l'appréhension de l'épidémie à travers une série de controverses – a révélé cette dualité. Utilisant les déclarations de Thabo Mbeki sur l'infection, mais également sur les relations raciales et les commémorations nationales, j'essaie d'analyser, au-delà de l'évident style paranoïde, une politique de la mémoire qui dévoile des vérités enfouies. L'incorporation du passé implique à la fois la condition historique, entendue comme l'inscription des structures sociales dans les corps et les vies, et l'expérience de l'histoire, comprise comme l'élaboration de représentations, de discours et de récits qui rendent compte du cours des choses. Considérées sous cet angle, les théories du complot deviennent moins des fantasmes que des faits incluant des projets génocidaires conçus sous l'apartheid. La reconnaissance de ce travail inachevé du temps est une étape nécessaire dans la construction d'un avenir commun.