

"Would the Holocaust have been possible if the Internet had existed?"

1.

In 'This is not the End of the Book', the Italian writer and semiotician Umberto Eco questioned whether the Holocaust would have been possible if the Internet had existed. He immediately answered his own question: "I'm not so sure. Everyone would have instantly known what had happened..." The "ich habe es nicht gewusst" (I did not know) wouldn't have had a chance. Knowing what happens is the first step to taking action. Even though that still doesn't fully guarantee that those steps are actually taken. The globally accessible, technological network such as we know it today, had maybe been able to prevent one of the deepest traumas in human history. Meanwhile we have become acquainted with the increasing political power of the Internet. China, Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria,...: no single regime - however totalitarian - remains in a state today to exercise an absolute watertight control over the information circulating through the net. WikiLeaks makes anonymous and illegal images and documents public, that without their intervention would never see the light of day, documents which are kept secret to avoid public outrage; images that unmask the blatant lies of 'official' information. The right of access to the facts and the right to accurate, verifiable information on the conduct of this world's economic and political powers are now more and more emphatically claimed by a steadily growing crowd.

2.

The possibilities of the worldwide web providing greater transparency of power to achieve something that could in turn generate increased democracy and justice can, however, also be employed in a different way. Having in all innocence written your particulars on a form in a supermarket in regard to a promotion of one product or another, it then often lands without your permission in a database that can thereafter be resold to other companies. Whoever, on the occasion of a purchase via the web, enters the number of his Visa card linked to his personal data, no longer has a hold on what else can happen with this information. If through Google you once showed an interest in, for example 'Alzheimer's', then that interest is immediately added to your 'profile'. As are also your subsequent questions. So again and again you arrive at your own preferences instead of the rich diversity brought by the preferences of others. Your world is captured; its doors are locked rather than flung open. The Great Digital Memory is absolute: it remembers everything; nothing can be erased anymore. Via Facebook and other such sites, we entrust personal information to the gigantic public domain. We even throw intimate stories up for grabs, which can easily be used against us... Should the right not therefore exist to delete our own information, to allow ourselves to 'disappear', to burn 'the book of everything'?

3.

The right to transparency, on the one hand, and to privacy on the other, often conflict with one another. And yet we need both. No single right, no single liberty can be absolute. The individual freedom so dear to us is restricted by the laws of the community in which we live. Does freedom of expression, for example, mean that we can say pretty much anything, including directing the coarsest insults at individuals and groups? Should this freedom not be linked to - and thus inhibited or enhanced by - a responsibility regarding what our words bring about? "Il y a des circonstances où se taire est mentir" (There are circumstances in which silence is a lie) said the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, rector at the University of Salamanca. They were the first words of the speech he delivered in 1936, addressed to the fascist general Millan Astray. Afterwards Unamuno was removed from office. Each form of freedom receives its concrete interpretation through the circumstances in

which it is exercised. Each absolutization of a/the form of freedom leads to atrocities and catastrophes. History has repeatedly taught us that. Democracy ceases to be a just political system when forcibly imposed. The communist utopia of equality turned into a monstrous regime when it silenced the opponents and killed them off.

4.

The developments of communication technology have increased the scope of communications exponentially. At any time of day, everyone seems to have something to share. Everyone wants to know everything, say everything. A review of the 'circumstances', a weighing of the importance of communication, is no longer at issue. A critical attitude towards our judicial system is certainly justified, but does any investigating judge therefore violate the right to information if he decides not to make any more public announcements in order not to harm the investigation? Dubious statements or opinions expressed in the media by public persons - in whatever social sphere they move - certainly deserve comment or criticism, but should channels like Twitter, for instance, therefore be used in a cowardly way (anonymously and from a safe distance) to spread slander, hatred and gossip? There are circumstances in which speaking is a lie and in which silence can be the most vital expression of our right to free speech.

5.

In her book 'Over het politieke' (On the political), the Belgian philosopher/political theorist Chantal Mouffe explains that the conflict of interests and ideologies actually forms the heart of politics. The democratic political system is the form, the instrument via which antagonisms can be expressed. In our current, daily political practice, that democratic system has degenerated into an instrument of consensus. It has become the expression of the power of the majority, a means to establish dominance in decisions, and this to the detriment of the core of democracy *as practice*, namely, the conduct of free discussion between opposites. "Any consensus is based on acts of exclusion", writes Mouffe. Liberalism supported by rationalism and individualism has, in this way, long since acquired a hegemonic position in all sections of society.

Naturally, these contradictions and different opinions have not disappeared. However individualistic and consumption-oriented a person's life now is, he still always feels the need 'to belong somewhere', to identify with a community, to give form to a 'we' feeling. This 'we' is different from the 'they' that belongs to another community. Given that the practice of free discussion between opposites is suspended, it often happens that the relationship between 'us' and 'them' turns from opposition to enmity, so says Chantal Mouffe. What it comes down to for the individual today is learning to handle contradictions, learning to live with paradoxes, learning to walk on a knife-edge. Just as in politics the 'we' and 'they' have to be thought about together and their relationship continually reassessed in different circumstances, one can also not separate the right to transparency and the right to privacy. Revealing and concealing must be thought about together. These are like two halves of the same shell.

6.

In 'Grenzen aan de vrijheid. Van de Sade tot Wilders' (Limits to freedom. From de Sade to Wilders) the Anglo-Dutch publicist Ian Buruma writes: "The absolute freedom that de Sade wanted to demand for himself was *the freedom of imagination, the autonomy of the writer, the artist, the thinker.*" In your head, said Thomas Bernhard, you can, if you like, destroy the world every day. The complete tabula rasa is only possible in our imagination. Creating and dreaming can bring forth ideas and images that can help us to change the reality of the world.

7.

The performance *Book Burning. Een verstopte geschiedenis. La mite brûlée* (*Book Burning. A hidden history. The Burnt Moth*) was created by Pieter De Buysser and Hans Op de Beeck. Hans is a visual artist, he creates images, objects, installations. Pieter is a writer and, here, also a narrator. This performance is the result of a silent, slow, intimate artistic friendship. In their conversations Hans and Pieter operate from that absolute freedom of the imagination that Buruma is talking about. They go forward together, sometimes talking and sometimes silent. They share a sensitivity for the object and for the story, for things that 'mean' something in themselves on stage, instead of letting themselves be 'defined' beforehand. They share a vital kind of mourning, an attraction for writers who have the tendency to burn their books: writers like Kafka and Valéry, figures like *Bartleby* and co. They share a fascination for the old Theatre of Enlightenment: *The Wunderkammer*. How such a cabinet of curiosities swindles and enlightens us with as much pleasure. They share an attraction for archetypal, timeless images that are as magical as urgently topical and politically charged. They share a fascination for the old Rabbi Nahman from Bratislavia: he had gathered up his friends and pupils and told them that he had written the ultimate liberating book. Then he lit a fire and threw his book into the flames. "Read the ashes", he said.

Hans has not made a 'stage set' to illustrate Pieter's story, and Pieter's story does not 'explain' Hans's object; from the outset, these two developed together and like autonomous worlds, overlapped, like two transparencies that together cause a third image to appear. They came out with an archaic, very simple form of theatre: a man with a wooden trunk who tells a story. They feel that 'the truth' commits them to this bright and enigmatic simplicity, to the possibility of a new beginning.

"Ein Schauspieler sollte ein Wahrspieler sein, etwas ganz Seltenes."
(Peter Handke, *Das Spiel vom Fragen*)

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