Remembering the future: The ethics of the absolute beginning[1]

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This article explores some ethical consequences of utilising a Derridean approach for thinking about issues of memory and temporality. Derridean thought appears to produce two contradictory ways of engaging with memory. The first of these, arising out of his critique of the 'metaphysics of presence', serves to tie us more firmly to the past, by arguing that persons can be responsible for past actions that they did not commit. The second movement acts in the opposite direction, by tying memory to the future, through an unravelling of the logic of the archive, which is seen to point always towards a future 'to come'. This paper will reconcile these seemingly contradictory results of Derridean insight, through the notion of 'iterability', before exploring what this may mean in the context of societies marked by inter-communal conflict and division. Through an examination of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, it will be argued that to treat memory as a gateway to the past in its immanent reality is to miss the point about the prevalence of memory in such societies, and is a venture doomed to failure. A process of constant beginning, whilst always retaining fidelity to memory in its alterity, will be suggested as a possible means of allowing such societies to move forward from a politics based on division and mistrust.

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> *'To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.'*
>
> Walter Benjamin [2]

In early 2008, the Irish-Republican political party Sinn Fein, who command a majority of electoral support amongst the Nationalist-Catholic community in Northern Ireland, announced their intention to commemorate the life of former Irish Republican Army (IRA) member Maireád Farrell, who was shot dead by Special Air Service (SAS) agents in Gibraltar in 1988. To mark the twentieth anniversary of the event, and international women's day, Sinn Fein planned to hold a celebration of her life in the main hall of Stormont, the seat of government in Northern Ireland (BBC, 2008b). The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), elected leaders of the Unionist-Protestant community in Northern Ireland, responded to this news, not only with condemnation of the glorification of a convicted terrorist (Farrell was imprisoned from 1976-86 for her part in the bombing of a hotel in the outskirts of Belfast), but by announcing plans to hold an event to celebrate the activities of the SAS in Northern Ireland during the 'troubles' (that is, the violent conflict that spanned the years 1969-1998, fought, in a narrow sense, between the Irish Republicans and British security services and, more generally, between the Nationalist Catholic and Unionist-Protestant communities of Northern Ireland). In the end, the Sinn Fein event was held in their own offices, and the DUP's planned response did not go ahead, but this example still highlights the manner in which political posturing in divided

[2] Benjamin, 1999: 246.

societies such as Northern Ireland often takes place over fault lines in the past. While in this instance the argument is fairly absurd, outdone in Northern Ireland only by the long-running dispute over the location of a new sports stadium[3], the limited and constrained nature of political discourse in such societies is still evident. Conflicting memories held by opposing groups, and in-fighting over modes of commemoration, can all-too often lead to political inertia and, in extreme circumstances, political violence.

This article will address these issues by asking what may represent a properly ethical way of engaging with memory, in the sense of the constant invocation of a past in present political discourse, in the context of inter-communal conflict and division. The theoretical context will be provided by the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

The paper will proceed through two main sections. The first situates a discussion of memory within the Derridean canon. I will begin the section by discussing Derrida's critique of what he calls the 'metaphysics of presence', before considering the impact of this critique on ways of thinking about memory and temporality. I then discuss Derrida's notion of the future 'to come', and its relationship to memory. These apparently opposite movements will then be linked through the concept of 'repetition', which is seen by Derrida as crucial to

[3] The proposed site is that of the former location of Maze Prison. Sinn Fein will only support the development if one of the prison blocks is retained as an 'International Centre for Conflict Transformation' – what the DUP label a 'shrine to terrorism'. See BBC, 2007.

the idea of the future 'to come'. The second section takes the form of a broad critique of the dominant modes of engaging with memory. Through an examination of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, I will illustrate how such approaches cannot provide a means of escape from the cycles of violence that divisive memories and memories of division can breed. Only a politics which recognises the inherent undecidability of memory can allow us to break free from such constrictive patterns of thought, by providing a space for the constant questioning of the linkages between memory and the past. This is what I call the ethics of the absolute beginning.

Before I begin to advance this argument, however, I must clarify more precisely why I am focusing on memory, and what it is I mean by this word. I do not accept the thesis that sees inter-communal conflict as the settling of 'ancient hatreds' in the present. However, what must be recognised is the role that notions of the past have played in the discourses *surrounding* the conflicts, in the ways in which they have been represented and understood, in the ways in which meanings of the conflicts have been articulated, transferred and relayed. Notions of memory and of the past, therefore, have informed the proscribed solutions to the problems caused by inter-communal violence. I do not wish to replicate such understandings in this paper, but engage with and challenge them, *question and undo* them. As it will become clear later on, my goal is for memory to be treated as unfixed, as an 'undecidable', to be engaged as a problem in itself, and not as a problem that can be solved.

Memory, therefore, is a highly ambiguous term. Any study that does not explicitly investigate the very nature of this ambiguity must provide some clarity as to what is meant by usage of the word. By 'memory' I mean not especially *what* people remember[4], but the invocation of a past event in present political discourse, in manners which influence how people act – what Jan-Werner Muller calls the memory that 'establishes a social framework through which nationally conscious individuals can organise their history' (Müller, 2002: 3), or what David Campbell might call the violent incursion into the past so as to close argument in the present (Campbell, 1998: 83-114). In other words, the presence of a 'past' in present political discourse, the invoking of a past in present political discourse, in manners which often seek to determine how people should act in the present and set a course for the future.

The legacy of Derridean thought

> *'This is why work cannot be purely "theoretical" or "conceptual" or "discursive", I mean cannot be the work of a discourse entirely regulated by essence, meaning, truth, consciousness, ideality etc. What I call a* text *is also that which "practically" inscribes and overflows the limits of such a discourse'.*
>
> Jacques Derrida [5]

[4] How could memory in this sense ever provide evidence for an academic inquiry? How can it ever be known what people truly think? See Edkins and Zehfuss, 2005: p. 457.
[5] Derrida, 2004: 52.

Throughout his intellectual life, Jacques Derrida mounted a sustained and varied critique on the assumptions and axioms of Western thought. His work transcended the borders of academic disciplines, both in its targets and by its very nature. Literary criticism, ethics, philosophy of religion and political theory are just some of the subject areas that have been shaken by his thought. This article will focus on one very specific area – the politics of memory – that must be re-assessed in the light of the Derridean project. As we shall now see, his work in its generality and its specificity addresses crucial issues related to the mysteries of memory.

Derrida, deconstruction and the 'metaphysics of presence'

A major facet of Derrida's early output was based around the critique of what he called the 'metaphysics of presence' (Derrida, 1976: 12). Western thought is seen as being characterised by a series of binaries: good/bad; inside/outside; masculine/feminine; true/false; and so on. While these appear to be simple opposites, Derrida contends that the first term is in fact privileged over the second. They are not simple dichotomies, but violent hierarchies (Derrida, 2005: 38-39). A key part of the maintenance of this violent hierarchy is the manner in which the first term is given 'presence' in language. It is the natural, self-evident term, the centre and the standard from which the other term derives and is judged against.

Such hierarchy is the target of Derridean deconstruction. Through a 'double movement' deconstruction aims to first overturn and invert the hierarchy (Derrida, 2005: 38) before moving beyond the hierarchy itself, beyond the system that gives rise to and depends upon hierarchy, exploding the conceptual linkage between the two terms – what Derrida calls 'marking the interval' (Derrida, 2005: 39). This creates a new term, a new series of terms, outside the deconstructed system, 'a new "concept"…that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime'. These are what Derrida calls 'undecidables':

> that is, unities of simulacra, "false" verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that could no longer be included within philosophical (binary) oppositions, resisting and disorganising it, *without ever* constituting a third term… (the *pharmakon* is neither poison nor remedy, neither good nor evil, neither the inside nor the outside, neither speech nor writing: the *supplement* is neither a plus nor a minus, neither an outside nor the complement of an inside, neither accident nor essence…*spacing* is neither space nor time; the *incision* is neither the incised integrity of a beginning, or of a simple cutting into, nor simple secondarity. Neither/nor, that is *simultaneously* either *or*…) (Derrida, 2005: 40).

It is crucial that deconstruction be understood as such a 'double movement', in order to counter the critical viewpoint which sees Derrida's project as nothing more than the nihilistic destruction of modes of thought. As Derrida explains in *Positions*, the concept which is to be deconstructed:

> must be marked twice: in the deconstructed field – this is the phase of overturning – and in the deconstructing text, outside the oppositions in which it has been caught…By means of the play of this interval between the two marks, one can operate both an overturning deconstruction and a positively displacing, transgressive deconstruction (Derrida, 2005: 56).

What is of particular interest here is the attachment of different endings to the prefix 'deconstruct' when describing the two movements. The overturning phase is seen to take place in the deconstruct*ed* field, suggesting that it is something that can be quite easily achieved, something that can be finished with – after all, to invert a hierarchy has always been the dream of the revolutionary. However, deconstruction must not stop here. For Derrida, 'to remain in this phase is still to operate on the terrain of and from within the deconstructed system' (Derrida, 2005: 39). Therefore, the second movement, the more difficult movement, must be undertaken. This phase is labelled deconstruct*ing*, suggesting that, unlike the first movement, it cannot be finished, can never finish. It is instead something that must always be affirmed. Deconstruction is that which explodes settled concepts wherever they form, which is *everywhere*, and *at all times* (Stoker, 2006: 182). This second phase is the phase which provides the new concept, that which is outside prior structures of thought - the positive, the open, the realm of new possibilities. An acceptance of the fact that this movement will never be finished and secured is essential to the ethos of deconstruction. Positive and affirmative movement is possible, but never guaranteed, never settled. As Derrida has stated, in a sentence that for me sums up the essence of the affirmative yet tenuous nature of deconstruction – 'I

always try to be as constructive as possible, but without any certainty, without any assurance that at some point I am not wrong' (Derrida, 2001a: 68).

Presence, memory, responsibility

Following the path set by the Derridean mode of thinking sketched above leads us to some interesting places when we turn to the problem of memory. The 'metaphysics of presence' that structures Western language and thought, and that Derrida's critique is targeted on, can also be seen as structuring our ways of understanding and articulating notions of temporality and memory (Zehfuss, 2007: 124). In the dominant modes of understanding, the present is seen as representing the absolute presence of now – a presence that surrounds us, a 'pure present', an 'autonomous given', *pure presence*. The past is seen as a 'former present', that which was once presence, but is no longer presence. The future is an 'anticipated present', that which will have presence, will be presence (Derrida, 1982: 16, 21).

Memory is the attempt to *re-grasp* the presence of the past. The possibility of memory in Western metaphysics is structured around such an ability to reflect the past in its concrete presence. However, Derrida contends that memory can only create a 'trace' of presence, an outline of a *false presence*, a presence that *never was present*. This is because memory is shaped and distorted by the 'frame of reference' of the one who remembers – that is, *the present*, the time of the one who remembers. When we remember something, we are no longer the

same 'we' that experienced the event (Zehfuss, 2003: 518). Memory is affected by the present, by present circumstances. Memory, therefore, 'can be seen to subvert a neat distinction between past and present, and introduce an element of undecidabilty between them' (Zehfuss, 2007: 179). A Derridean, deconstructive approach upsets the idea that the past leads inexorably on to the present and future, and that memory can give us access to the past, to its presence. For Derrida there is no such thing as an 'absolute present', a moment marked by the full presence of the now. Everything is instead chipped through with traces from the past and looking towards the future. Such a conceptualisation of temporality has interesting consequences for responsibility in the face of past events.

Derrida argues that individuals bear responsibility for things they have not done, for things that happened before they were born. 'We inherit a language, conditions of life, a culture…which carries the memory of what has been done, and the responsibility, so then we are responsible for things we have not done ourselves, and that is part of the concept of heritage' (Derrida, 2001c: 102). We are thus responsible for the past, and we must bear within us the weight of this responsibility. The act of challenging the notion of a linear progression from past-to-present-to-future thus, rather than severing our links to the past, actually renders us *more responsible*. This is because the argument 'I was not there when that happened, so I bear no responsibility' no longer holds. If the present is marked as much by absence as by presence, then the past as a 'former

presence' that can be retrieved by memory cannot exist. Our absence in the past that memory traces can no longer be an issue if this is the case. It disappears as a problem, to be replaced by the deeper problem of our responsibility for actions that we did not commit.

What is important for responsibility in the Derridean sense is not whether or not we were present in the past recalled by memory, but whether or not the memory, the past invoked in the present, structures or influences our ways of engaging with others in the present. The memory of past injustice, past violence and so on, need not be clear and vivid, and need not provide us with a concise set of actions to take in the present. Rather, they need only mark us, so that we bear their trace within us, in a way that may not be fully understandable to oneself and translatable to others.

The question of memory and the future 'to come'

For Derrida, the question of memory does more than tie us to a past. In *Archive Fever* he argues that the question of memory is 'a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow' (Derrida, 1996: 36.). The concept of the future employed here must be radically differentiated from the idea of the future as an 'anticipated presence', as something that can be thought of in terms of the present or of present experience. Instead, it is to be thought of as that which arrives without warning and without invitation, as the coming of an event that

cannot and must not be anticipated. This is what Derrida calls the future 'to come'. The future is thus the coming of an event that cannot be foreseen.

For Derrida, memory depends upon such a future. We record things as we wait for the coming of the event that will justify our actions. Memory is thus governed by 'the retrospective logic of a future perfect' (Derrida, 1996: 18). This future orientation constitutes the logic of the archive. While apparently governed by a concern with the past, the archive, according to Derrida, in fact looks towards a future, to a future time when their meanings can be fully understood. This is why we record the past now, as we do not understand their full meanings. We remember and we have 'history' because we *disagree*. If memory was not contested, 'events would simply be apprehended with their true meaning apparent to all' (Campbell, 1998: 36-37), without the need for history, for recollection, for argument. Without the lack of confidence in the veracity of historical truth there would be no need to mobilise power and force to make certain memories and certain understandings of the past dominant over others, and there would thus not be such conflict and violence over the past. So when memory is stored, when it is recorded in an archive, this represents a preservation of a past until a time when it can be understood, until the coming of a moment when the 'promise' of history is answered.

Memory and the promise of a future that is always 'to come' are thus inextricably linked. A Derridean approach ties memory to the future. Instead of

viewing memory as something conservative or something that keeps politics constrained and 'stuck in the past', memory is to be seen as something oriented towards the future.

Ethics as repetition

The above paragraphs chart two outcomes of a Derridean approach to memory and temporality. The first concludes that we bear responsibility for past actions in our societies, even if we were not present when they were committed. In other words, this tells us that in order to act ethically we must not disregard the past and look only to the future, as to do so would be to act irresponsibly. The second approach concludes that memory is tied to the future, that it always looks to a future 'to come', through which the promise of history may be answered. In other words, this tells us that we cannot just look back when engaging with memory, when attempting to produce an ethical orientation to memory.

Taken together, these approaches tell us we must look backwards *and* forwards – in the present, to be ethical, we must do both. How can we think this double-movement, backwards and forwards, and how may such an approach benefit societies marked by inter-communal conflict and division? Turning to Derrida's notion of 'repetition' allows us to think through this apparent paradox. For Derrida, repetition is integral to the very idea of the future. He writes in *Archive Fever* that 'there would be no future without repetition', and that 'one…is the

condition of the other' (Derrida, 1996: 79-80). What exactly is meant here by repetition?

What is sometimes translated as 'repetition' is at other times referred to as 'iterability'. Derrida draws a sharp distinction between his idea of repetition as iterability and the normal understanding of the word: 'iterability means repetition and difference, and *alteration* and *singularity*. In iterability, in the logic of iterability, you have repetition, mechanical repetition, and *transformation* and thus *singularity*' (Derrida, 2001b: 76-77). Repetition therefore *makes difference*. To repeat, to copy, always creates a new thing different from the original - a new singularity.

Repetition thus allows us to think of an ethical present that is mindful of the past, that does not ignore the past, whilst simultaneously leading us to something new, to a future radically different from the present. This is what Derrida calls 'that strange repetition that ties an irrefutable past [i.e. that violence or trauma which must be reckoned with] to a future that cannot be anticipated [and thus a future of justice and ethics]' (Derrida, 1995b: 54). Such a movement does not ignore the past, leaving injustice to fester in the name of progress, nor does it invest the past with a meaning that can allow it to swallow the present and the future. This is the new ethical beginning, the absolute beginning, the ethical singularity tied always to the past but always looking to the future. It attempts to make something new out of the same, make a future

out of the present, a future that carries traces of the past that are not necessarily understood, but are not forgotten, rather borne within us as we strive towards a future of justice and ethics.

Using Derrida: The Bloody Sunday Inquiry

> *'Bloody Sunday was a tragic day for all concerned. We must all wish that it had never happened. Our concern now is simply to establish the truth, and to close this painful chapter once and for all… I believe that it is in everyone's interests that the truth be established and told. That is also the way forward to the necessary reconciliation that will be such an important part of building a secure future for the people of Northern Ireland.'*
>
> Tony Blair [6]

In societies marked by inter-communal division, conflicts often play-out over fault-lines in the past. As I stated in the introduction, I do not mean by this that all inter-communal conflict is about the past, but only that such ideas often play crucial roles in the discourses *surrounding* the conflicts. This is nowhere more telling when it comes to post-conflict reconciliation, to the attempts to find lasting political solutions to seemingly intractable conflicts.

It is often assumed that the only way to move forward from such conflict is to either forget the past, in order to allow persons to move on, or invest the past with a fullness of meaning that can allow for reconciliation in the face of the

[6] Blair, 1998.

'truth'. Dominant modes of engaging with instances of inter-communal conflict seem to be governed by this dual logic. Instances of the first approach can be seen to govern many of the dealings of the international community in the former Yugoslavia. In June 2007, for example, NATO acted to prevent the ethnic Serbian group the 'Tsar Lazar Guard' from celebrating the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje[7], due to the fear that the contentious nature of the group and of the historical event in question would lead to a security risk (Reuters, 2007). The Office of the High Representative in Bosnia, meanwhile, has recently urged political parties not to use the emotive issue of Srebrenica as a 'pre-electoral tool', but to focus on economic reform (Press Office, 2008). The language of prosperity is thus used to trump the language of memory, in order to keep it out of political discourse.

If such an approach is seen as untenable, if memory is seen as too important as issue, politicians often adopt the opposite strategy. Under this logic, the past must be rigorously interrogated, in order to find the truth of what happened in past moments of contention or division, in order to provide closure, and allow people to move on. This is the logic of the truth commission, of the inquiry, of the report, of the investigation into the past. It is to one such investigation that I will now turn, in order to more fully illustrate the profitable political possibilities contained within Derridean thought.

[7] The battle provides Serbia with a historical reason for its claim on Kosovo, as it acts as a

'Bloody Sunday' is the name given to the events of 30th January 1972, when a civil rights march in the city of Londonderry ended with the deaths of fourteen people at the hands of British paratroopers. It was the symbolic death of the peaceful movement for political change in Northern Ireland, and signalled the stepping-up of the violent IRA campaign, and the beginning of twenty-five years of near-uninterrupted conflict and killing.

Shortly upon coming to power, and in a move designed to foster the first faltering steps towards peace in the province, the Blair government announced on 29 January 1998 that a full and extensive inquiry into the event was to be launched. Headed by the Law Lord Mark Saville, the inquiry was tasked with establishing 'the truth of what happened that day'. 'Our concern now', Blair's address to Parliament continued, 'is simply to establish the truth and to close this painful chapter once and for all' (Blair, 1998). The logic here is clearly one of resolution of a problem, in order to facilitate reconciliation. For the Nationalist-Catholic community, Bloody Sunday represents the most blatant example of British repression, and a symbol of the evils of what they see as the foreign occupation of a part of their island. Revealing the facts in an open and public forum is thus seen as offering a chance to resolve the issue, to make Britain appear more compassionate to the Irish, and to make a partial political solution (i.e. power-sharing and devolution, but no immediate move towards a

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founding myth for the Serbian nation – see MacDonald, 2002: 69-70.

united Ireland) appear more palpable. For Blair, the correct course to take is evident, 'simple' – the truth will close the matter.

Lord Saville echoed such sentiments in his opening statement on 2 April 1998, while adding his own slant on the nature of the Inquiry:

> Our task is to try and find out what took place in this city [Londonderry] that Sunday afternoon. It seems to us that we cannot simply try to reconstruct events as they occurred on the streets that day, without paying proper regard to what led up to these events. Thus we shall be looking at the background to Bloody Sunday to the extent necessary to enable us to reach as informed a conclusion as possible (Saville, 1998).

An extended remit was thus put in place, leading to the expenditure of up to £181 million of taxpayers money (BBC, 2008a) on a ten-year (and counting) inquiry that has yet to make a final report. However, it will have to stop somewhere. One cannot investigate backwards and sideways forever – although the complexities of the history of Irish-British relations can make such impossible demands on its students.

So, ten years on, what has the Bloody Sunday Inquiry achieved? This cannot be known, of course, as it has yet to give its final report. However, a speech given by Sinn Fein MLA[8] Raymond McCartney to the annual Bloody Sunday commemoration on 29 January 2006 provides an insight into the reception the report might get from the Nationalist-Catholic community. In his address,

[8] 'Member of Legislative Assembly', i.e. member of the devolved assembly in Northern Ireland.

McCartney articulates a very clear narrative of the events of that day and, perhaps more importantly, the political context that made the shootings possible, as understood by the likes of Sinn Fein and their supporters (who, we must remember, represent the majority of Nationalists-Catholics in Northern Ireland, in terms of electoral support). The narrative progresses as follows: Britain and their Unionist-Protestant allies create the Northern Irish state in terms of injustice and inequality against Nationalists-Catholics; when Nationalists-Catholics begin to make demands for justice through the civil rights movement, the political organs of this state move to discredit them, as they cannot foresee an end to their privileged position; they therefore criminalise the civil rights movement, legitimising the state-sanctioned murder of the protestors marching in Derry on that date; those killed are then immediately identified as terrorists, ensuring that the responsible parties are not prosecuted. McCartney emphatically concluded that 'there is no escape from declaring – that it was murder and attempted murder' (McCartney, 2006).

Republicans such as McCartney thus hold a certain understanding of what Bloody Sunday is, of what those words mean. Their dominant position within the Nationalist-Catholic community in Northern Ireland, meanwhile, makes the proclamation of differing narratives difficult (though, of course, not impossible). A British-led inquiry is not going to change this. If the report does not coincide entirely with their understanding Republicans will reject it, and continue the struggle for justice in their own terms. As McCartney states, 'the families' [of the

victims] expectations of the Inquiry…is not a wish list but the acknowledgment of proven and tested fact' (McCartney, 2006).

This example shows how the attempt to resolve the 'problem of memory' through historical investigation cannot provide escape from the divisive understandings that govern politics in societies scarred by inter-communal violence. Similar examples could be found from other places around the world[9]. Strongly held political narratives of the past are not challenged by competing political narratives, no matter what levels of expenditure, rigour and expertise are afforded. This is not how memory works. There are no objective criteria for judging which past events matter, or for how they will be remembered, and with what consequences. More detailed knowledge of the past will not resolve contentious issues, or deliver us from politics tied to violent memories. I thus concur with Avishai Margalit when he argues that 'the idea that truth by itself will bring about reconciliation is a doubtful empirical assumption' (Margalit, 2002: 6). And even if it could, how far back will one have to go to find true historical truth? What level of detail must be reached? There are no answers to these questions.

[9] The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, for example, or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

Deconstruction, memory and the ethics of the absolute beginning

What, then, is to be done? How are we to approach events like Bloody Sunday, when agents of a so-called liberal and democratic state fired upon a peaceful political demonstration? Taking from Derrida, I argue that the very basis of the political narrative of the past must be challenged. We must deconstruct the assumed links between memory and the past, and work to reveal the inherent instability of all attempts to fix historical meaning or act as if memory or history can give us access to a fixed historical meaning. Derrida offers us a fascinating means of breaking out of modes of thought which see the present arising inexorably out of the past, with memory as the neutral arbitrator between the two. In 'The Time is Out of Joint', he states that the 'teleological schema [that is modes of thinking which privilege progression and linearity] can be applied to everything', with the *exception* of forms of thought and knowledge which '*begins* by questioning, displacing and dislocating the machine of this teleology' (Derrida, 1995a: 30-31 [emphasis added]). To me this suggests a constant process of beginnings, a constant undoing of beginnings, which may allow us to face the problem of memory head-on. Memory must not be concretised, given an impossible presence in the present; nor side-lined and ignored, but revealed as inherently unstable, unfixable and undecidable.

Deconstruction does not deal with *telos*, with beginnings and endings as normally conceived. Deconstruction begins where we are, in the 'moments that are characterized by their urgency in the present' (Dauphinée, 2007: 84). The

new concept demanded by the deconstructive move represents a new beginning, an *excessive* beginning, that which belongs to the 'nonhistory of absolute beginnings' (Derrida, 1995a: 6, 80) - the beginning that begins in the middle, where we are, where we always are; the beginning that does not strive towards an ending; the beginning that, through its very excessiveness, explodes the concept of beginning as part of a teleology of beginning-middle-end.

Such a concept demands a new orientation to the past. By recognising that we are always at a *beginning*, the need to act in manners dictated by past events disappears. The time and effort that is spent debating the past in societies such as Northern Ireland may then be spent on other pursuits. If it is realised that it is not possible to find the 'truth' of history or memory then political energy may be exerted on improving the present, not arguing over the past. However, this is not to say that the past should be forgotten. That is after all an inherently conservative move – perhaps the ultimate conservative move – which denies the genealogical nature of social norms. This is why we must recognise that every beginning is also a *middle*. We are in the midst of circumstance that we cannot vouch for. Things have happened in the past, and we must not ignore them, but mark them, bear the trace of them within us. Each person is part of a tradition, inheriting a legacy when they enter a given community. For those of us born in Northern Ireland, this legacy includes instances of violence like

Bloody Sunday, and all the other clashes and killings that scar our memory and shape our identity.

We must also take responsibility for creating new beginnings in the present, and thus the future that is this new beginning that we must always assert. Ethics is the navigation through this impasse, this aporia, this ordeal of the undecidable (Derrida, 1995b: 5). The absolute beginning is that which recognises the past whilst jettisoning it, that which links present and past in an im-possible relationship of continuity and negation. It is that which in the end must come down on the side of memory or forgetting, in every individual instance, but always with the awareness that neither choice can solve the problem of memory once and for all, always with the awareness that the issues may resurface[10].

To grapple with this paradox may provide a way out of a politics tied to a falsely and violently fixed past and into a future truly open to justice and to ethics. An event like Bloody Sunday is something that has taken place – this cannot be disputed. What can be disputed, what *must* be disputed, however, are the ways in which the event is made politically relevant, for the present and for the future. This relevance is of an essentially contested nature, but this does condemn us to silence. Rather, the historical event is something that *must be contested*,

[10] For while Derrida recognises the impossibility of making an assured and final decision, he also recognises the impossibility of remaining in the undecidable – Derrida, 1989, p. 22.

something that must be negotiated. To ignore the memory of such an event serves to erase the tragedy of needless death; to seek the 'truth' of the event, in the hope that such knowledge will settle the matter once and for all, is to waste time and money on an impossible and thankless task[11]. Instead, the event must be recognised as something that has happened, as something that has left its mark, but in a way that can never be truly understood or made apparent to others through logical argument or presentation of evidence. In the instance in question here, the British government could have achieved as much by admitting they acted unlawfully on Bloody Sunday, by issuing an apology. Such a symbolic gesture would perhaps have had as much impact as the full inquiry, without the need for such wasteful expenditure of time and resources.

In a sense, it does not matter what happened that day. What truly matters is the now, and the decisions we can make to improve our lives and the lives of others. With a changed appreciation of the present may come a changed appreciation of the past. As the present becomes shared and inclusive, so may the past. This is the way to tackle disputes over historical fact and remembrance. To attempt to proceed by ignoring memory or by making it concrete will not work, but merely keep the wheels of conflict and division turning in the present.

[11] This is not to say that such inquiries always fail to help those struggling with the legacy of conflict or injustice. It is merely to say that they can never fully erase this legacy, never fully deliver societies from their violent pasts. In other words, while they may be successful in individual cases, making it fallacious to say that they are a complete waste of time, they deconstruct under their own logic of excising the past and allowing societies to move on freed from the shackles of history.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to explicate an ethical approach to memory, building upon the legacy of Derridean thought, and applicable to the context of societies marked by inter-communal violence. I have attempted to show how dominant strategies of engaging with memory work within the logic of a dichotomy which demands that, in order for politics to function, memory must be either ignored, removed from political discourse, or concretised, fully investigated so that disagreement will become impossible in the face of verified 'fact'. The Derridean approach that I have put forward argues that neither manoeuvre is possible – everyone in a society bears within them responsibility for what happened before, while the past that full investigation seeks to illuminate does not exist, in the sense of something that can be reached from or reclaimed by the present. Such thinking, I argue, cannot break out of a cyclical politics tied to disputed history. Taking from Derrida, I have argued that in order to move forward, we must instead challenge the teleology of historical narrative, which sees the present arising unproblematically out of the past. Through a constant questioning of such assumed links, we may develop a politics based on a constant process of beginning that, whilst not ignoring the past, does not weld the present and the future to the dictates of memory. The ethics of the absolute beginning may allow us to break the teleology of cycles of violence, and deliver societies such as Northern Ireland from a politics that at times seems dangerously stuck in the past.

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