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Living through Defeat: New Anthropological Insights on the Vanquished

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Among her publications, let us remind: *Israel. A Diaspora of Memories*, edited with Dario Miccoli and Esther Schely-Newman (*Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* [Online], no. 16, 2019, URL: <https://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/?issue=16>) ; ““Seeing the Voices’: Egyptian Jews from one Shore to Another (Europe, Israel, United States)”, in Sian Sullivan, Michèle Baussant, Lindsey Dodd, Olivette Otele, and Irène Dos Santos (eds), *Disrupted histories, recovered pasts (Conserveries mémorielles* [Online], no. 25, 2022, URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/cm/4854>) ; « De quels exils sont faites les mémoires ? », in Sarah Gensburger and Sandrine Lefranc (eds), *La mémoire collective en question(s)* (Paris, PUF, forthcoming in 2022).

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Keywords: defeat, identities of the vanquished, memory and history, violence, activism, disruption, liminality

Mots-clés : défaite, identités des vaincus, mémoire et histoire, violence, activisme, rupture, liminalité

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“I recall the first time I felt the tragedy of [the] Palestinians penetrate my Zionist shield. ...I could not share their sense of loss, but I could and did share deep nostalgia mixed with pain for the lost landscape and a nagging feeling of guilt, for my triumph had been their catastrophe. They were indeed my brothers but also my mortal enemies. I knew that had they won they would have destroyed our landscape. ...I couldn't interfere in their attempts to draw lessons from what came to pass and expect them to assume even partial responsibility for their catastrophe. But what were my lessons? Do we not have a special responsibility, if only because we turned out to be the victors? What have we done to the vanquished enemy? Have we transformed a struggle for survival into an ethnic cleansing operation, sending people to exile because we wanted to plunder their land?” (Benvenisti, 2002, p. 3)

In his book, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948*, Meron Benvenisti brings into relief the transformation and destruction caused by the Israelis in the human and physical landscape of the defeated Palestinians, in particular the rural and agricultural ones, and says this is what winners do to modify history and memories. Benvenisti also shows that collective memory structures the living space (Halbwachs, 1941). It is not enough to erase places, olive fields or urban neighbourhoods to forget the vanquished communities that shaped them. Lastly, he outlines how the Palestinians had to understand and live with defeat as a major factor in shaping their life chances (and cause of death), forms of belonging and expectations within and across countries, while the Israelis, the winners, did not have to do so.

This special issue was born from wonder. Many works in anthropology, and more broadly in the social sciences, study the dominated, the silent presences in history, the victims of state repression or conflict, the refugees, the colonised, and the multiple effects of discrimination, marginalisation and violence that they experience. In addition, research focuses on international conflicts and civil wars, processes of independence and the collapse of empires that have often led to the reconfiguration of physical and human spaces and divided populations along friend–enemy and local–exogenous lines. Few works consider the notion of defeat that often encompasses these phenomena and even less the world-view of the defeated. And when the issue of defeat is discussed, it is usually through the significant dates and great events that determine shifts in political systems and societies. Yet, few researchers like Benvenisti tackle the non-discursive practices, daily life, tiny catastrophes and series of miniature events that influence and suspend the destiny of the defeated (Kracauer, 2000, p. 59-60). Why is this so? Is this disinterest in defeat the result of a specific tradition of historicism (Benjamin, 2000) that identifies with the winners? What can we learn, as anthropologists, from studying defeat?

Following Nathan Wachtel's line of thought (1971), we propose an anthropological look at how being defeated, through the heterogeneity of experiences, their time thickness, and their fragmented effects in various fields of existence, structures life chances, identity, political and emotional matrices and historical consciousness. Specific case studies in various geographic settings (Syria, Jordan, Sri Lanka, Laos, Greece, Spain and Romania, and the Israeli-Palestinian territories) will provide an empirical basis for examining the polarisation between victors and vanquished that tends to cloud this heterogeneity observed in the fieldwork.

In exploring defeat and what "being defeated" means from an emic perspective, we would like to bring to the table two issues. The first issue concerns the need to describe and analyse further how violence, discrimination and inequalities caused by the defeat (or pre-existent but exacerbated by it) interact with the fall of the social organisation and world-view of the vanquished. This requires looking at the new (power) relations between the victors and the defeated on one side and between the vanquished themselves on the other, always rooted in specific contexts. It engages two related sets of questions. First, the effects of defeat in everyday life and social reconfiguration: How does a population, a social group, or an individual experience the domination of the victors? Does it create forms of solidarity or, on the contrary, does it lead to a loss of solidarity, plunging individuals into solitude while facing the weakening or loss of support from members of their former community? Second, "when", "how", "for whom" and "why" some defeats still matter, while others do not: How may interactions with the winner influence the memorialisation process and silences? What role does the diaspora play in these processes? Do new communication technologies and the different dynamics of globalisation change the balance, empowering the defeated to express their voice without always gaining control over representations, interpretations and dissemination (Gready, 2013)?

The second issue deals with the *temporality* of the defeated as a singular form of belonging, a political and social (non-)participation that colours the whole of existence *a posteriori*. How does defeat shape the past and the future in different spaces and contexts in the present? We argue that defeat creates and imposes a new form of "identity", sometimes interiorised and rarely reappropriated. It may affect and reframe socialisation to the values and master identity of the political body, subjecting the defeated to a reversed temporality that manifests in various processes such as undoing their entitlements and belonging. Individuals may face a rift between the social (their position and status), the individual (as a singular actor who is, feels and acts "as" a Syrian, a Greek or a Tamil) and the formal legal and political recognition. How do losers reconfigure their lives in different contexts and produce alternative meanings of defeat in exile, sometimes based on different values? Does "being defeated" take precedence over the various components of identification? Or does it remain one element among others protecting the individual from forms of polarisation and exclusion?

1. Omnipresence and Invisibility of the Defeated in Debates

During the anthropological turn between the end of the 1970s and the 1990s, new research fields emerged, and among them, there was a growing body of literature on different kinds of violence, suffering, inequality, conflicts, insurgency and revolution. This literature can be schematically divided between anthropologists who study those who suffered violence and marginalisation and those who study the fighters and perpetrators of the violence. The first group has written ethnographies on the consequences of different kinds of violence and various forms of social exclusion, exploring how individuals and communities cope with their violent past and troubled present (Das, 2007; Das *et al.*, 2000). They focused mainly on the medical, psychological and social care and recognition of victims and refugees by states and international actors (Agier, 2008; Fassin, 2010). They also dealt with the issue of traumatic memory (Malkki, 1995; Antze and Lambek, 1996; Fassin and Rechtman, 2007; Baussant, 2018) and questioned the building of a transnational justice (Claverie, 2012) and post-conflict reconciliation (Thiranagama and Biner, 2013).

The second group has developed ethnographies on non-state armed groups or political mobilisation, exploring the grounds for the active commitment, ideology, symbolism and politics of insurgent organisations and the experiences of their militants (Feldman, 1991; Aretxaga, 1997; Hoffman, 2011; Shah, 2018; Dubal, 2018). However, while this scholarship produced a critical understanding of contemporary forms of political violence and conflicts, it rarely addressed what happens when these movements are defeated. It barely tackled how imaginaries that sustained the militancy may continue to influence the place of the defeated group in the “new reality” and their relationship with the victors. We can say the same about the former group of scholarship: they rarely analyse what it means to be a defeated subject and what are the consequences of defeat, not only in the moment but also in daily life thereafter.

We must turn to historians and, more marginally, to other social scientists for analysis of defeat. For example, Walter Benjamin (2000) argues that history is a tool that victors use to marginalise the defeated, the subaltern and the working class a second time. He proposes a new way to write history, which includes the memories of the vanquished and the subalterns and aims to challenge the representations carried out by the dominant classes. Partly drawing upon Benjamin’s arguments, Reinhart Koselleck, who fought at Stalingrad, states that the mainstream idea that the winners write history is accurate only in the short term because in the long term, “historical insights are provided by the vanquished” (2011, p. 313). For the vanquished, everything happened differently from what they expected and hoped (*ibid.*). The unexpected unfolding of events compels the defeated to rebuild history in a different way (*ibid.*, p. 314–15) and, more broadly, to rethink society in its entirety and in a different and new manner (Bloch, 2006). Arvid Lundberg’s paper in this special issue illustrates this idea.

He describes the experience of defeat of some pro-democracy activists during Jordan's Arab Spring in 2011. Upon being violently attacked during a sit-in by the largest group of counter-demonstrators, they realised that most of Jordan's population was not interested in political reforms. Unable to defend any more an ideal of democracy based on public debate and inclusiveness, they responded to the defeat with concealment and exclusion. Lundberg's contribution here unravels the common-sense idea that humans living under an authoritarian regime "naturally" want to break the chains that bind them and fight against the oppressor.

However, because these challenging experiences often take place during the emergence of new political regimes, like for the defeated countries after World War II, it may open avenues for new paradigms in the interpretation of a community's history, outlook, forms of identity and political participation (Dower, 1999; Hashimoto, 2015). However, not all vanquished react reflexively and welcome such unexpected change. In fact, their responses to defeat are most varied (Beckwith, 2015): avoiding any rethinking of their history or confrontation with the post-conflict reality; denying defeat, constructing a counter-hegemonic memory (Chivallon, 2012); or practising some form of resistance (Scott, 1985). These complex responses reflect how defeat engenders transformation that reframes (post-)conflict situations and ongoing social changes.

2. Social Conditions for the Emergence of Vanquished Identities

Several works focus on how defeats, despite their potential for negativity and destruction, have significantly impacted the building of identities, solidarities and communities throughout history. The 1917 Kanak war of independence from France in New Caledonia (in the south-west Pacific), which reframed the Kanaks' memory and identity for a century, illustrates this point (Bensa, Goromoedo and Muckle, 2015). Defeats marking a political, social and historical turn—i.e. leading to a period of conquest and domination—most frequently enter communities' memory. Some authors in nationalism studies have argued that "having suffered together" (Renan, 2006) may paradoxically be a major factor in the emergence of a feeling of belonging to the same nation or political system. Shared defeat could thus give rise to a modern community (the nation-state), which is both the offspring of the defeated and its heir (Mock, 2012, p. 8). In this perspective, defeats are depicted as important factors and symbols in the construction of a national identity (*ibid.*) and/or a basis for supporting the ideal of national homogenisation. This ideal is generally fuelled by polarising the construction of collectivity and individuality. Its aim is to define what and who "we" are, what and who the "others" are, and the rapport between the "thus defined" different communities (Čapo Žmegač, 2010). But they often take a national approach to understanding these phenomena, which are sometimes beyond or below the national level. In this perspective, the notion of collective identity often coincides with the limits of the nation and its territory. Moreover,

little is said about the transmission of memories, of experiences lived or not, carried out by the individuals.

The papers in this issue distance themselves from this national frame: we find fighters and civilians in exile, prisoners in concentration camps, vanquished activists retired in their small networks, Israeli activists who protest against their own government and take the side of the Palestinians, and people living at the frontier who try to make sense of the structural weakness of their country through a Buddhist legend. Using an ethnographic approach, they observe how defeat may create new alterity relations, strengthen old ones or go beyond binary, mutually exclusive oppositions. They explore how the transnationalisation of many societies, the existence of diasporic vanquished people who re-territorialise their history in other contexts, the position of the vanquished in the social structure, and the moral, political and legal labels that the winners put upon the vanquished are also likely to shape social identities. In other words, we can't reduce the consequences of defeat to the dichotomy of "us" and "them" and a relationship to politics lived along a friend-enemy line with its emotional charge.

We instead intend to understand how, why and under what conditions new or renewed identifications are coming into the world through, after and "thanks" to defeat. A defeated group can resist the dissociation provided by the winners' narratives or be trapped by the radical divergence between their way of being and a new socio-political reality (Daniel and Knudsen, 1995). Fallen onto the wrong side of history, they can face discrimination, racism, violence and surveillance. Reintegration in the aftermath of defeat is often very complicated—the solitude of the vanquished emerged in many articles of this special issue. The Israeli activists who demonstrate with the Palestinians against the wall, analysed by Petra Andits, are considered traitors by their own country. Arvid Lundberg and Amal Abdrabo, working on activists in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in Jordan and Egypt, use the metaphor of the "bubble" to describe their marginalisation. After their defeat, they share their desire for democracy and social justice among their comrades only in close and sometimes virtual circles.

We propose to discuss this idea of violence, suffering and trauma as a foundational dimension of society's identity and memory (Bensa, Goromoedo and Muckle, 2015; Ricoeur, 2000; Mock, 2012; Gonzáles Calleja and Pinto, 2018), not destroying the social fabric but building it. In his anthropological book, *La vision des vaincus* (1971), the ethnohistorian Nathan Wachtel points out that defeat is not just a military or political matter. It dismantles all aspects of society, including the imaginary, culture, religion and social organisation of the vanquished. Defeat affects people's way of being in the world and their relationship with others. Such tragic events can be debated as identity- and community-defining. Yet, does it constitute the time zero of society and identity? In this regard, Marshall Sahlins (1985) highlights how the interpretative framework of the experience of rupture and defeat and the

particular answers offered by society are always structured by former patterns. In other words, defeat brings social, cultural and political change, but individuals and groups understand these changes with their pre-existing shared representations and imaginaries. Following this perspective, Giacomo Mantovan shows in this special issue that the Tamil fighters in Sri Lanka who survived the total annihilation of their organisation, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and are in exile in France, tell their stories with the shared representations of the LTTE: they still need the LTTE to describe their identity and their place in the world.

3. Moving beyond Binary Categories

In Elias Khoury's book, *Children of the Ghetto: My Name Is Adam*, when the Birzeit historian Hanna Gerios asks the narrator Adam Dannoun for the will of his grandfather who died in Siberia, he is looking for a written letter to prove that Arab Bolshevism started in the prison camps during World War I. "I told him that this was all I had, that he didn't need anything else because Qarut's testimony was obvious". But the historian replied that this was not enough, "History must be based on written documents, preferably official ones, that this is the very foundation of science and History: 'We can only confront Zionist historians with true History, recognised by historians'". "The History of our Nakba is not written; does that mean we have no history? That we don't have a Nakba?" asks Adam, incredulous. "How would this historian have wanted us to write History? Should it be left to the Zionists alone? Who told him that the written History of Palestine was true and not a general enterprise of falsification elaborated by the victors?" And he concludes: "I am not writing...for my story to be recognised by Arab and Israeli historians because my tragedy needs no legitimisation; it is engraved in hearts and places; stones, trees, rivers and seas tell it. I don't care about the science of scholars if it is trapped in false stories rooted in truncated documents".

This excerpt accurately reflects the vision that runs through social science research on the vanquished and victors divided by an ultimate border: memory and History. To the defeated, all that remained was a burdensome memory. By contrast, the winners' final mark of domination and victory would lie in the control of History, the symbolic erasure of the vanquished from the official narrative, any social and public form of remembrance, and silence. Thus, most works assume that memory and oral History would be the refuge of the defeated, and official and academic History the "realm" of the winners.

As a result, the shared content and meaning of the memories of the vanquished and the victors, both restrained by the material and symbolic traces left behind, are often compartmentalised. A few authors, such as Lucette Valensi (1992), who have examined the visions of both, remind us that the glory of the former remains always linked to the latter's disgrace and its memory, albeit hollow. They point out how memory becomes a political resource in the broad sense, not only for the defeated, but also for the winners, especially when they are powerless to respond, except in a symbolic way, to a social protest or the

impossible healing of the past. Ultimately, they highlight how even overt references and debates within official History or political, social and academic spheres are a roundabout way of talking about silenced, uncomfortable and disruptive events (Ragaru, 2020).

We think this assumption about the production and formation of the historical consciousness of the defeated suffers from a primary, and perhaps most obvious, difficulty to which we aim to respond. It concerns the perception and meaning of the notions of “defeat” and “victory” and their content, varying from the perspective of academic actors to that of institutional and political actors, the associations involved, and ordinary individuals. These different connotations—going from a catastrophe to a normative experience that can be overcome—challenge, as stressed above, the winner–loser dichotomy. They lead us to point out, firstly, the heterogeneity of the situations of defeat—wars, civil conflicts, failed revolutions, the collapse of political regimes such as colonial empires or the fall of communist regimes at the end of the twentieth century. The ways in which the vanquished and the victorious are separated are diverse, as are how they are reconstructed (or not) in connection to (each) other. Secondly, there is the heterogeneity of the losers themselves, not all of whom are combatants or activists, as highlighted by Charlotte Al-Khalili, Amal Abdrabo and Yoann Morvan. Reflecting upon the conflict between the Zionist Israelis and the Arab Israelis that happened in the spring of 2021, Morvan describes the heterogeneity of the city of Lod. This ancient city, theatre of tragic massacres during the Nakba in the last 70 years, is today impoverished and multi-ethnic, inhabited by many defeated, subaltern and lower-class citizens: Palestinians (with Israeli citizenship), disadvantaged Jews of different migratory phases, and migrants from Ukraine and sub-Saharan Africa. These populations carry their memories of past tragedies, i.e. the Nakba and other wars which brought bloodshed to the region. While these heterogeneous populations succeeded in living side by side, the arrival in 2010 of a new dominant neighbour, the religious Zionists, changed the scenario. This colonisation from the inside by the Zionists inflicted upon the vanquished further humiliation and broke the balance between them.

Such heterogeneity compels us to define the line of demarcation that the categories of losers and winners draw between sometimes blurred positions. Depending on the context, this line offers many different perspectives on otherness: the vanquished may be perceived as an enemy to be fought, a traitor to be punished, a child to be educated, a barbarian to be civilised, an animal to be exterminated. Moreover, the perception of the defeated and how the broader society sees them depend on the scale and use by individuals, families and groups. They are not shaped only by the disruptions caused at the time the defeat occurred or in the immediate aftermath. They evolve with political regimes and contexts through spaces and time and within specific social, cultural and historical frames (Sahlins, 1985). As Mariann Vaczi points out in her paper on sport in the time of dictatorships in Spain and Romania and in concentration camps, even the most extreme contexts can engender modifications, however temporarily, of the usual relationship between the ruler and the ruled, two categories

untraversed in ordinary times. She focuses on these situations through ritualised behaviours such as playing sport in a state of defeat and self-harm shaped by totalitarian institutions and dictatorships. She shows how playing sport produces among the defeated a means of restoring the assaulted boundaries of the self, a sense of control, however fragile, and freedom denied outside of it. It stages and builds reversals of roles in contexts and places where hierarchies are otherwise inalterable. Maria Kokkinou analyses the refugees who fled the Greek civil war (1946–49) and went into exile in Bulgaria. Their repatriation became possible in 1983. However, some of them chose to stay on in Bulgaria. While during the post-war period, the categories of “victors” and “vanquished” were based on the military and political fields, after the repatriation, another criterion of evaluation—education and social ascension—changed the perception of defeat. The exiles who finally returned to Greece realised they had reached a better level of education and a better quality of life than their compatriots in Greece. Their return allowed them to reverse their perception of being defeated versus being winners, to reposition themselves as winners despite their political banishment and exile.

4. Defeated in an Age of Connected Worlds

At this stage, we face another challenge—that of the interaction and cross-cutting of history with various other productions and representations of the past(s), including social memories. The new technologies of today influence how stories are shaped, displayed and reinterpreted across successive generations and in diverse contexts. They affect social relations and knowledge production, creating “interrelated and disjunctive ‘scapes’ that feed and are fuelled by the local and the global” (Feron and Voytiv, 2022). They may help voiceless and ordinary people to exchange and share their experiences and co-construct their representations within and beyond local contexts. In a nutshell, they impact the production, circulation and reception of forms of remembering, imagining and performing continuity through disruption, loss and defeat at different scales.

However, we can also argue that they raise at least three issues. The first refers to forms of control, including fake news, from social and virtual media, including fake news. Amal Abdrabo’s article on post-revolution Egypt shows how the various people involved in the street demonstrations in 2011 and 2013 have seen their freedom increasingly restricted through the multiplication of forms of control in public and virtual spaces. It denotes the failure of their aspirations and actions for bread, freedom and social justice. Connectivity technologies that allow sharing and multiplication of voices are also instruments to control the free circulation of ideas and people (Duffield, 2018). Thus, the more connected the world, the less this free circulation seems possible, compelling ordinary individuals to live within the margins of their society. They create their bubble societies, shaped by different forms of memorisation such as graffiti art, public writings, songs, textbooks and photos. They view

these various forms as tools against silences and seclusion, using which they can be voiced, heard and seen, navigating from one margin to another.

The second issue lies in the inequality, reception and audibility of the defeated's narratives and memories. Not all vanquished experiences, especially morally condemned ones, are audible and intelligible outside the circle of the people concerned. Not all are equally efficient in reaching and mobilising a wider audience. They may elicit contradictory responses, including empathy, indifference or antagonistic reactions. In other words, specific conditions allow and limit the narratives, their forms, and how they circulate or are silenced even through social media. "Voice can no longer, if it ever really could, be considered a simplistic form of power. The struggle now is less over the articulation of the marginalised and subaltern voice than for greater control over voice, representation, interpretation and dissemination" (Gready, 2013, p. 147). Moreover, silence and erasure of the vanquished's memories are often portrayed as a strategy of domination of the winners, imposed on the defeated. However, the defeated can also practise silence as a tactic of power. Silence can provide a sense of control and allow them to continue through defeat, as Giacomo Mantovan highlights in his paper. Silence then reveals a subtle form of domination and resistance in the face of the winners and a considerable social effort by the vanquished, which paradoxically keeps the memories alive.

The third issue is that not all experiences are expressed solely through storytelling and in a standardised and/or globalised episteme. It also raises the question of where these experiences of defeat can find an audience and the historical and cultural landscapes of collective memory they can relate to, create an affinity with or fail to reach. Working on the invisibilisation of the Syrian peaceful revolutionary movement, Charlotte Al-Khalili questions the epistemology of revolutions as delineated by Eurocentric approaches of defeat and enlightenment. She points out how these readings hinder the ability to capture the Syrian revolution and the traces they leave on people's bodies, self, social and gendered norms, everyday life, kinship relations, religious imagination, and spatio-temporal practices. Based on fieldwork among Syrian youth and older housewives exiled in the Turkish borderland, Al-Khalili's analysis emphasises their discrepancy with the representations of the actors. They conceive what happened not in terms of success or failure, but as an ongoing process embedded in a long history of revolt and unrest and an apocalyptic, end-of-the-world perspective. In this respect, Al-Khalili calls on us to include the absent and those who are no longer visible as active agents of history. She underlines the need to work not only on other epistemes relating to the past, but also to take into account "those who are no longer and will no longer be present or alive" and, perhaps, as Jacques Derrida suggests, "the unpredictable future of those who are not yet alive in the present" (2014, p. 20).

5. The “Deserving” or “Undeserving” Vanquished

A last challenge concerns research on the vanquished memory that mainly overlaps with a preoccupation since the 1980s with the voiceless, the “dominated”. This focus is connected with the development of the “victim” issue, especially in human rights literature and life narratives linked to the notion of trauma. These two trends provide platforms for various voices circulating across multiple spaces and times, struggling with asymmetrical forms of power and domination. We moved from a situation where memory was the discarded realm of the vanquished to one where it emerged as a political resource, a framework for collective mobilisation and action, as already stressed, within and often beyond national borders, through acts of remembering. It unsettles “private beliefs”, “public discourses about the national past” and official history, “generating public debate, sympathy, and outrage” (Schaffer and Smith, 2004, p. 4). Studies, therefore, focus on the defeated when they embrace the status of the victim and enter into the framework of trauma: this framework shapes the forms, the content, the audibility of their narratives, and, as a result, often departs or diverges from their experience and sense of the self. Memory is, therefore, a way to access public recognition of their condition, but a limited one: they have to fit into a normative format, be “subordinated to writing or the agendas of others” and additional forms of hierarchies and control to those of research and knowledge production such as “hierarchies of global dissemination and the public sphere” (Gready, 2013, p. 145).

The literature on victims shows us that access and entitlement to this fragile status remain conditional on the moral positions that undergird them. Moreover, it is not self-evident that defeat traumatises, nor that all the defeated, when perceived as victims, experience and endlessly rehash trauma. Violence can be experienced in different ways, depending on the status of those involved and how it ends, and the social trajectory of the victim often continues after this experience. Mariann Vaczi raises this issue of how the undermining of trust and confidence in Spain under Franco or within the home in communist states produced different answers through space and time, sometimes characterised by a high level of reflexivity, sometimes by denial and silence.

This view in terms of trauma defines defeat and its memory as a disruption to and between people, social relations and societies, which generates lasting emotions. Extraordinary violence would produce this disruption, a point on which some of the papers here tend to take a contrarian view: they seek to reinscribe it in the relative continuity of previous social routines and events (Welzer, 2007), history, mythology and cosmology. Thus, Brett Le Saint connects current evocations of the legend of Sri Khottabong—the story of a distant hero who cursed the kingdom of Vientiane after its monarch betrayed him—by the people on either side of the Mekong river. These evocations place collective experiences of violence and conflict within a larger cycle of reinterpretations and rewritings of the legend. History is invoked to

embody a causal chain of the past major defeats of Laos and to link historical events to the classical hagiography of the Buddha through karmic causality. The narrative of Sri Khottabong among villagers is thus mobilised to interpret the impacts of the Vietnam War as a recurring consequence of the original curse. This narrative differs from the official Lao national imagery, which emphasises continuous forms of resistance rather than the repetition of defeat. It provides a framework for making sense of the violent and disruptive events and the experience of the asymmetrical power relations that shape the long-term relationship between Laos and Thailand from the status of the defeated.

Not all vanquished people match the image of the “good victim” promoted by the political sphere and the social sciences (Lefranc, 2002). Thus, how can we grasp the shift from pacifist manifestations to more violent forms of action which alter their pacifist image? And which undermine the premises underpinning some research on the Arab revolutions, namely that they would result from a democratic aspiration and a desire for change shared by the whole society (Lundberg)? Moreover, not all of the vanquished identify and define themselves as victims. Some claim the status of combatants or “survivors” and distance themselves from victimhood. Giacomo Mantovan’s analysis of the Tamil Tigers illustrates this phenomenon of fighters led to a permanent exile of history and territory by the lack of an alternative between victory and death. He highlights the cultural and social impacts and the new subjectivities resulting from the defeat, seen as the collapse of the world for the members of the violent nationalist revolutionary movement. He shows how recalling their past experiences does not materialise as a life narrative, with a beginning, a middle and an end (Ricoeur, 1983–85). Instead, they are stories of mourning for a lost past world with no horizon for the future, stories told in fragments of proud fighters becoming anonymous refugees. The case presented by Petra Andits also illustrates this issue from an original perspective. She underlines that being defeated can also be a choice and a political act of agency, as is the case for Israeli activists around their double sense of defeat: losing to the power of the occupation and the disintegration of solidarity. She shows the ambiguity and privilege of their position, which allows them, unlike the Palestinians whose struggle against the wall they join, to renew forms of action and even to lose. But even if they choose defeat, unlike the Palestinians who don’t have any other options, this choice has a social, political and sometimes human cost that draws their perception and condition of being defeated within their winning camp.

Conclusion

Analyses struggle to grasp these various cases of the vanquished, who are often reduced to people filled with nostalgia and resentment. They choose to acknowledge a specific form of defeat and loss and, therefore, to ignore others or approach them through a moral framework rather than a critical analysis. However, the defeated experiences and memories lived or transmitted still count or affect different social spaces. We must take them seriously if we

agree that the issue of memory—establishing a relationship to the past (Lambek, 1996, p. 303)—is never morally or practically neutral: “Such an argument recognises that how we view memory, and how we remember, have implications for how we view the person, and vice versa” (*ibid.*, p. 302).

In his book, *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot (1995) reminds us that the more critical a past issue is in the present for specific segments of civil society, the more limited the interpretations of facts offered by research works. The papers presented here argue for a rigorous investigation of defeat and its political, social and moral effects of liminality on groups and individuals even before they are erased, silenced or cast as the losers of history in the winners’ narrative. In other words, we need to get them out of the past where they are consigned, as a founding myth or a *damnatio memoriae*, and consider them in our present, from which point they challenge us.

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