

Maja Haderlap: The persistent winds of history

The sun sails ahead of the hurricane in the west, two thousand years gone, and nothing of us will remain, writes Ingeborg Bachmann in her poem “Great Landscape Near Vienna”, in which she lets the persistent winds of history blow over the city.

One hundred years is just long enough, measured against the persistent winds of history, to develop the skill of remembering, of overcoming the mind’s thresholds of time and place. Anniversary commemorations by the state certainly challenge us to pause for a moment and look back into the future. It is a liberating, solemn but also distressing moment, during which exemplary achievements and successes, as well as political aberrations, reveal themselves.

But how can collective history be made visible, clear, given the sheer number of people and their histories?

The persistent winds of history primarily and most noticeably blow through family memories. One hundred years covers barely three generations, who, as experience shows, physically come together and spend a certain part of their lives together, passing their history from hand to hand or from mouth to mouth.

My generational memory begins with the collapse of the imperial-royal monarchy and the creation of the Republic of Austria. My grandfather was a young man of 18 when he served in the last Isonzo offensive in October 1917 and was wounded on the Piave River as a soldier of the imperial-royal army. After he recovered and could finally come home, the Republic was declared. My grandmother always claimed she had survived three wars: the First World War, the Carinthian armed resistance struggle and the Second World War. Her delicate form, on which the memories of her tumultuous history and the Ravensbrück concentration camp had a lingering effect, may be invisible to the eye, but it is still present in my thoughts and feelings.

As soon as we turn our gaze from our origins and consider things generally, history appears fleeting, virtually ungraspable. A collection of clues, of relics, as writing on the wall, as an opaque cultural and material mixture that we can hardly penetrate with our thoughts. During moments of happiness we believe we are able to see something glimmering through the depths of historic time, questions for example, that burn and concern us as if they had only just been broached.

I was invited to give a speech on this state occasion. An astonishing, audacious invitation that honours me but also impelled me into an unrelenting cycle of doubts. I spent a long time considering what position I could even give my speech from. I can't speak on behalf of a party or on behalf of an institution or group. At most as an individual with my own life story, as a poet, a Carinthian Slovene, an Austrian who has a relationship with the Republic of Austria. Having a relationship not only means having passed through state educational institutions or paying taxes, it also means getting actively involved, being committed and participating in political orientation processes. This relationship is not a matter of advantages or certainties; in truth, it is about questions of identity, about what we are and what we want to be.

As I see it, identity is a process, not a completed state, not a fixed, unchangeable constant. It does not start and stop in the now and instead is made up of origin, of language, of what has been inherited, learned, lived, and experienced, of work, suffering, belief, love, hope, of forgetting and remembering, of fears and longings, of what we were, what we are, and what we want to become. As soon as identity solidifies or is curtailed or dictated from the outside, it transforms into a slogan, an accusation or a mask. Identity is determined by bonds, and bonds can be life-affirming or destructive. State entities are also subject to processes of forging an identity and of change. The relationship between the individual and the state moves within those contexts.

The decisive criterion is to be found at the beginning of this unusual relationship. It is the criterion of democracy. Democracy is an organisation of law, of participation in societal and political processes. It runs on the balancing of interests, on dispute, on argument, on correction, on freedom of the individual. In contrast, the authoritarian state bullies the weak, the Other, prohibits any possibility of contradiction, free will, political involvement, control of power, change. Democracy is – to put it in familiar terms – the antithesis of the authoritarian family, usually headed by a patriarch, with family members at the mercy of his decisions.

The history of the Republic of Austria moves in the political field between war and peace, between repression and societal and cultural awakening, between recession and prolonged economic and social progress.

The First Republic of Austria was created as a democratic project following the collapse of an old monarchical order. The rising political forces wanted to transform the trauma of the collapse and the war into a dream of progress. But the loss of the old traditions, combined with a dramatic economic crisis, was too heavy a burden. The young parliamentary democracy had to defend itself against a shadow empire of fears and authoritarian traditions. The First Republic is stored in the memories of the generations as an era of discord following the loss of the powerful father. Back in the 19th century, in the wake of industrialisation and increased mobility, people had seen themselves being torn from their accustomed ways of living. Following the destructive war, the sense of abandonment must have been overwhelming. What still echoes or lingers from this period, in my view, is – in addition to the presence of so many cultural and historical memorials and monuments – a prevailing sense of loss of the homeland. This feeling of loss shaped Austrian popular culture. What was lost is idealised – not just in the rural parts of Austria – into a beauty that has perhaps never been seen. It is the image of the idyllic past that is being doggedly held up, even though all of the injuries and humiliations remain hidden beneath it.

The demise of the old world could hardly be counterbalanced by universal suffrage, which included women for the first time, the struggle for fair pay, the introduction of the eight-hour workday or the Social Democratic movement. The old ways continued to have their effect, in the resurgence of antisemitism, in the yearning for a strong man and in the upwelling of the national question. The First Republic initially attempted to suppress all multilingual cultural references to the former crown lands. The Carinthian Slovenes were most affected by the requirement to renounce their language and culture. In retrospect, one might say that the majority of Austrians of the First Republic wanted nothing better than to become German. But there was a high price to be paid for those aspirations. The Austrian democracy quickly toppled over into an authoritarian state, into civil war and ultimately into Nazi dictatorship. The relics of a multilingual, multi-religious, democratic reality had been almost entirely destroyed by terror, violence and war by the time that followed the Anschluss, the annexation to Hitler's Germany. It

is said that Austria disappeared from the map for years, but Austrians were to be found on all sides of the front, including the apocalyptic murders in the occupied eastern part of Europe.

The question of how this could happen still fills us with horror today.

When we recall who fought for Austria during the Nazi era, we find it was individuals. The resistance, which was what even made it possible to recreate a free Austria, was organised and acted in groups, but it was individual in most cases. That fact casts a special light on the impact and importance of individuals who act ethically. The Austrian resistance was carried out by people who, at a time of tightly organised power and total propaganda, did not throw their humane attitudes overboard. It is a conglomeration of almost commonplace, helping, courageous gestures that defied the will to annihilate and the organised malevolence against people. We have been given democracy as we know it not only thanks to this civil courage and in view of the many victims of the Nazi regime. We also owe it to strokes of political luck and to the negotiating skills of certain individuals.

At this juncture I would like to recall a loss that often remains unmentioned on official occasions, the loss of a generation of Austrian writers and artists who during the Nazi era were exiled or deported, deprived of their livelihoods, driven to suicide, or killed. Their works are still casting some of their brilliance on the country that didn't want them. In their literature, history is condensed and images and yearnings from the world of yesterday – so near and yet so far from the world of today – are preserved.

I believe we must trust the profound shock of all of the survivors of the catastrophe of the Second World War, as expressed by the phrase *Never again*. If we fail to do this, we will be condemned to repeat political mistakes. Based on this inner certainty of the survivors, the Charter of Human Rights was formulated and the idea of a common Europe was born. Those achievements stand before us, pointing to the future, as a promise and as a mission.

The success of the Second Republic of Austria is founded on the State Treaty, neutrality, economic prosperity and the currently much-maligned social partnership of workers' and employers' organizations and the government. The Austrians developed the identity we assume today when we think of Austria. In our time, there has been major modernisation of educational policy and legal systems as well as structural and institutional modernisation, all of which

included the entire country and affected every single citizen. We were lucky enough to have experienced a market economy organised as a welfare state, tamed capitalism, which allowed the people to participate in its successes. The equal status and emancipation of women broke up the power and prerogatives of men, thousands of years in the making. Progress in gaining respect for equal rights in everyday life was and still is halting, however. The Republic also had some problems with implementing the rights of Austrian ethnic groups as enshrined in the State Treaty. This was related, not least, to the continued effects of the traditions of German nationalism, which they did not want to face up to.

The writers, the artists, after having lost their predecessors, opposed the image of the country – which relentlessly wished to escape into the idyll, into forgetting – with persistence and gentle force, as Peter Handke once put it. With their work, which was often met with a lack of understanding, they helped safeguard Austria's self-critical equilibrium.

When we acceded to the European Union, we took a ground-breaking decision almost as if in a trance, and we're still afraid of our own courage. The globalisation of markets, associated with the spread of digitalisation, the fight against the destruction and littering of our planet – all of these require international political cooperation. After Austria integrated into a multilingual Europe, our country, too, came to terms with its polyglot roots and recognised them as part of its own being.

However, the political ground on which we stand has not calmed down since we acceded to the European Union. We sense that we have entered a process of change similar to a slowly growing hurricane. We have still had little time to get used to the expanded possibilities for political decision-making in Europe, although we have also observed with satisfaction that the political Europe is taking shape.

Just as we have managed to pull ourselves up based on the achievements of the welfare state, we are being told we must finally be adults and take care of ourselves. Who is grumbling in the background of the state, the old, all-powerful father or another power, with invisible hands pulling strings and an invisible face? What is hidden behind the aspiration of running the state like a company? Is it the idea of separating states from their function as community organisations and pushing them onto the free market? That states are competing with each other and have to

hold their ground on the state market just as a supermarket does, using bargains, beauty, health, freshness and cheap, willing human capital to attract global investors? This presupposes a transformed understanding of policies, implying that they are to be organised according to the criteria of competition and follow the rules of selection of the fittest. Which produce victors and the vanquished and subject societal action to the battle mode of the global economy. Policies that want to turn citizens into people optimised for competition, rating, weighing and evaluating everything we do. Using algorithms of course, because invisible algorithms outweigh arguments and count more than a real person with a real history.

A considerable portion of the pervasive feeling of insecurity is rooted in the fear of being removed from the public eye and from the support system due to being an error-prone, sick, old person who is unproductive for the economy. Even if nationalistic parties all over Europe think they can offer national identity as a home to replace the broken sense of public spirit for citizens who feel insecure, the crisis is much more profound than that. It is less tangible but more fundamental than the upheaval in the early 20th century. It is destroying the feeling of belonging and responsibility, it is changing the enlightened view of humanity, it is interfering with the genetic potential of people as social animals so that they ultimately become economic humans who act according to the criterion of maximising their own self-interest. Of course, the new economy might work with hardly any people or states.

The persistent winds of history have become thin and barely perceptible. We don't listen because we distrust the language. Particularly the political language, which is dressed up for the media like a box of chocolates. The messages being distributed to us are wrapped in shiny paper, but the filling covered by the chocolate may taste bitter. We don't know and we have no time to look to where language and policy are focused, to the affected people, who are intended and affected. We have enough to do as we open other beautifully packaged fortune cookies, which are ultimately revealed to be cheap fakes. We do our best to resist the art of persuasion used in motivational language, which rains down on us like confetti from almost every channel. In return, we let off steam on social media, showing that we have understood the signs of the times. We master the high art of insult, humiliation, put-downs, deception; we have internalised the rules of battle and get personal when someone criticises us. We're fine, but the signs of the times point to stormy weather.

The big tech companies are facing our states with serious new challenges. The digital giants have enriched us with their technologies, but a level of power that was previously almost unimaginable – which we can't control and can hardly influence – has also come into our lives. By searching, we get caught up in the snares they have laid for us on the Net as we lose control over our actions. Once we come under time pressure and allow the last fibres of our lives and bodies to be monetised, once we agree to turn our desires, feelings and imaginations into a measurable value, a commercial product, we will have definitively given up our idea of ourselves as social individuals who act ethically.

But the individual who acts ethically is the heart, the linchpin of every democracy.

Democracy is also the only form of rule that includes the Other and minorities and therefore the only system that is able to integrate the people who are coming here from other countries and traditions, for different reasons, as people who are jointly responsible for the common good and the values of democracy. Only a bond to the country and its democratic values can break up the many parallel societies and help everyone concerned resolve and endure conflict.

With regard to the people who are fleeing, for whom the Mediterranean has become a death zone, with regard to the destruction of our environment, in view of the fantasies of totalitarian power that are becoming more assertive as a result of technical development, the questions of the future will be of a humane and ecological nature. We will have to defend human rights and peace against the destructive potential of general mobilisation. We will release ourselves from the restrictions of the moment that we would like to inflate into eternity with the help of technology, and enter into real time. *With an ear sharply tuned for the fall*, according to Ingeborg Bachmann's poem, after the disenchantment caused by analyses and data, we will arrive at our true, vulnerable Gestalt.

The Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka described the necessity of democracy with this sentence: *Democracy must lead as confidently as instinct*. That instinct for democracy in a united Europe is my birthday wish for us and for the still-young Republic of Austria.