

## **The Contrabassist and the CEO: Moral Judgment and Collective Identity**

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**Abstract:** How much is a moral judgment on a single act influenced by circumstances which have little to do with the nature of the act itself? How much have certain moral judgments to do with the common history and shared experience of a certain group of individuals? Using two cases taken from life (a German musician and a German CEO behaving both in a morally wrong way but with very different consequences from the point of view of moral judgement and with very different reactions from the German public), the article tries to give an answer to these questions, touching issues like: guilt, moral responsibility, collective responsibility, and collective identity.

Some years ago, while I was living in Germany, an incident occurred that caused a big sensation throughout German society. During a tour in Israel of the world-famous Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, one of its musicians signed a credit card bill at the bar of the hotel where they were staying, using the name “Adolf Hitler”. The 54-year-old man was not considered by anyone as having particularly rightist leanings; on the contrary: he was a registered member of the Socialist Democratic Party in Germany – and was, as confirmed by all those present, including the waiters, nicely drunk. However, these circumstances did not prevent him from being fired immediately from the orchestra for having allegedly damaged its image and – what is more interesting for us – receiving unanimous condemnation from almost all of the German public: politicians, commentators, journalists and ordinary citizens (at least the ones whose opinions were heard in interviews or in letters to the editors in the country’s main newspapers). Not one person ever mentioned the possibility that it could have been just a very stupid and distasteful act of bravado or the rash act of a drunken man.

Shortly after this episode, there was another occasion in which a drunken German was the main figure. The Italian police did detain for a short time the newly designated CEO of a major German corporation, who was sitting with a colleague and a secretary on the steps of the celebrated staircase of Piazza di Spagna in Rome, drinking Chianti (probably an expensive one), completely drunk. The policewoman had asked the

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trio to leave and the CEO had insulted her heavily— in Italian –and in a sexist way. The reaction of the German media and public was very different this time: no moral condemnation at all, only some ironical commentary, with even a certain tendency to justify the man’s actions: his fresh promotion as CEO, the good Italian wine, the nice Roman night... His reaction was considered ostensibly a case of what Germans call “Kavalierdelikt” – a peccadillo committed by a gentleman that does no harm to his reputation.

If we reduce these two incidents to their main points, we could say that the persons involved in them acted in a similar way: two Germans get drunk in a foreign country, lose their self-control and insult their “hosts”. Nevertheless, these two different incidents caused diametrically opposed reactions in German public opinion. In the case of the young musician a final condemnation took place with no possible extenuating circumstances like his state of intoxication, a clean political register, the fact that the man, being so drunk, probably lacked awareness of the real impact of the offense. An external observer could have granted him these circumstances, *if he or she had no knowledge of recent German history*. In the other case, the main figure got a pass from German public opinion (the Italian one scarcely registered the incident) although he did insult both the woman personally and women in general, being the word he used gender-related.

We could ask ourselves whether this difference of judgment is *justified*, but I would like to find out the grounds on which it is based, i.e. to *explain* the difference. What makes the reaction to the first incident differ and the second? Why do the same group of people (the German public) react in a different way to two events, which apparently are similar? More generally: How much is a moral judgment on a single act influenced by circumstances which have little to do with the nature of the act itself and concern a wider historical and cultural context? How much have certain moral judgments to do with the common history and shared experience of a certain group of individuals?

To understand better the reaction of the German public to the incident with the musician, we should consider what he is accused of. He insulted the memory of six million of Jews killed by the Nazis under Hitler. Meanwhile, the CEO insulted the sexual morality of the policewoman, that is: he insulted a particular person, not an entire people or the memory of the dead. It seems that nobody doubts that the first offence is much worse

than the second one. Why? Is it because the musician insulted six million people, while the CEO insulted just one person? Or because it is worse to offend the dead than the living?

It is sure that these aspects play a role, but I don't think that they are decisive. The CEO could have offended the dead relatives of the woman: Romans even have a special expression for this kind of insult and the CEO could have picked it up during his Roman stay, since the locals widely and generously use it. Decisive are rather, other elements: The way the six million people died, the nationality of the musician and the nationality of the dead and of the waiters (of course I am using "nationality" in a wider sense than – say – citizenship, since the six million murdered Jews were citizens of many European states). In the case of the CEO neither his nationality nor that of the policewoman is relevant. If it is so, then in certain cases moral judgments can be determined by certain considerations that do not concern the act itself and are external to it.

We could say that these considerations are not external at all. What makes the act of the musician morally wrong is exactly the fact that he is German and the dead and the waiters are Jews. If the incident had taken place in a Finnish restaurant and the main actor had been Peruvian, we would judge the whole thing differently. We would speak of a bad joke – unless the Peruvian were a Nazi adherent. Maybe we would be less upset even if the Peruvian would do this in an Israeli restaurant. It would be an offense to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, but probably we would see it with different eyes than in the case of a German's action. What is decisive is the fact that the perpetrator belongs to a nation that bears the main responsibility for the Holocaust<sup>1</sup>.

This way of describing the case presents some difficulties. It is not problematic to create a class of moral judgments connected to the fact that perpetrators belong to a certain group. Indeed, this is an everyday experience we have: we think that certain groups should not act in a certain way, while other people may. Or we think that the fact that the perpetrator of a morally wrong act belong to a certain group makes things

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<sup>1</sup> I will leave aside the fact that under the Nazis responsible for the imprisonment, transport and killing of the Jews and of the other victims of the regime there were individuals from many countries, including the occupied ones like France, Ukraine, the Netherlands, etc. and not only the allied ones like Italy or Croatia. It seems that in this case these actors are considered as individuals acting in name of a German regime based on an ideology that had developed historically in Germany (National Socialism is as a matter of fact a peculiar form of Fascism and distinguished itself under many aspects from the Italian original and its Spanish, Portuguese or Hungarian variants – which in any case were by no means better than Nazism).

worse. Belonging to a certain group may bring with it certain particular duties or may give to general duties a different quality, straightening them. It is, for example, bad when an adult abuses a child, but it is worse when it is a parent, a close relative or a teacher, since we suppose that these categories of people have particular duties towards children who are under their supervision. This is also true in cases in which the duties in question are less “strong” than in cases like child abuse. Let us examine two examples concerning bribes.

(1) My car is broken and I want use it tomorrow. I do not need it really, I could just take the bus, but I love driving my car. So I go to the garage to ask the mechanic to fix it. He says he has no time because he already promised another customer to repair her car for tomorrow. Taking out my wallet, I offer him extra money to fix my car first.

(2) Now imagine that I am a contractor who wants to get a contract from the city government, although my company is clearly unable to meet the city’s eligibility requirements. Nevertheless in order to get the contract I offer money to the official who has to decide which company has to get the contract.

If both the mechanic and the official take the money, they will be culpable of accepting bribes. But we will consider the two cases in different way: the acting of the official will appear us more serious, because she is supposed to act in the interest of the public, and not only in her own self-interest (unlike the case of the mechanic, who, after all, repairs cars for profit, not just for the benefit of car drivers). Even if we do not consider the consequences of the unethical acts of both persons (which are obviously worse in the case of the official), but just the subjective attitude of the actors (accepting money to unfairly favor the briber), we will maintain that there is a difference: the mechanic broke his promise toward a single person (the other customer), while the official broke a promise towards the community. We assume that officials have a very strong duty towards the community whose lives they are called to manage – particularly when they are elected officials; a much stronger duty than the one a mechanic has towards his customer. Moral judgments on actions (and on actors) may be also very well influenced by the social role played by the actors themselves.

In the case of the CEO, we (and also German public opinion) give no importance to the fact that he belongs to a certain group. We could, for example, consider his nationality, his social role and his gender; but we would not consider these aspects

really relevant. He is German (a foreigner), a manager and a man, but if an Italian female worker had insulted an Italian policeman, the two actions would have had the same moral quality: it is an offense to the other person and deserves our moral condemnation – a condemnation, which in the case of our CEO, was not forthcoming from the German public; but this is not relevant for what I am trying to say here (we could say, at most, that German public opinion tended in this case to be rather influenced by the class the CEO belongs to, and to be male chauvinistic, showing itself quite forgiving towards an important male manager<sup>2</sup>).

In the case of the musician the fact that he is German is decisive – even more than the fact that the waiters are Israeli: if he had acted that way in Majorca or in Acapulco, we would consider his behavior no less despicable. The underlying idea therefore seems to be that the fact that the musician is German brings some special obligations towards certain groups of people or with regard to certain kinds of behavior. Being German could be a relevant element in describing an action like being a parent in the case of child abuse or an official in the case of accepting bribes.

That means that we accept the idea that the members of a group (in this case, the German people) can be held somewhat responsible for acts committed *in the past* by *other* individuals belonging to that group. In other words: We accept the existence of a *historical moral* responsibility for groups and their members. This idea of a collective moral responsibility is not unproblematic. To sustain it we have to suppose that a people is an entity whose identity remains the same in the course of time – like the identity of an individual, *but not completely*. In this case, the history of a people is like the biography of an individual with an important difference: the person who has committed a crime will always remain guilty, while a people will just be morally responsible, since I do not think that the concept of collective guilt make sense when used diachronically. I cannot be guilty for something that my ancestors did, since I *was not there* when the injustice was committed.

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<sup>2</sup> Maybe there was also some jingoism in the reaction of the German public opinion: we could do a mental experiment and imagine a drunk Turkish male CEO insulting heavily a German policewoman in front of the Brandenburger Tor in Berlin. The reactions of the German yellow press (*Bild*, etc.) would have been probably less sympathetic and would have at least condemned his rudeness.

We should maybe give a closer look to the idea of collective guilt, starting with the general concept of guilt. Putting aside the legal concept and considering for the moment just the moral one, we usually say that someone is guilty when the following three conditions are met: (1) she acted against socially accepted moral norms or against norms which she recognizes as valid<sup>3</sup>; (2) this action is a positive one (she did something forbidden by the norms) or a negative one (she refrained from doing something which was commanded by the norms); and (3) the actor was aware of the morally wrong quality of her action but did it nevertheless, although she was not compelled to do it<sup>4</sup>. Moral guilt is therefore connected to (1) the existence of accepted moral norms, to (2) an act violating these norms and to (3) the actor's will to act the way she acted. It is very difficult for all these three conditions apply to a collective actor like a people, because actions are always the work of individual actors: even if all the members of a collective should act in the same way, we would have to do with a sum of single actions, not with a collective action – at least not in the sense of an action that is based on a will to act. When we speak of “collective will” we do this only in a metaphorical way – exactly as when we speak of a collective as a “body”.

Things are different when we refer to *legal* actions committed with the authorization and in the name of a group of individuals, such as the case of the acts of a government. In these cases, we admit in part the possibility that a collective may be held culpable for the actions committed in its name. This is not actually an accurate description of what really happens, because it is not the collective itself who *acts*, but its representatives. Furthermore: only *legitimate* representatives of a collective (e.g. legal entities that legitimately represent that collective, like governments) may really act in the name of the latter, binding therefore the collective to bear the responsibility of that act. On this basis international law imposes compensations on countries that acted wrongly against other countries, e.g. waging an unjustified war against them (like in the case of Germany after both WW I and WW II). Sometimes – particularly in the case of governments – the

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<sup>3</sup> Someone can feel guilty also for having broken rules, which only she considers valid.

<sup>4</sup> If someone commits a wrong under constriction, the question of her guilt becomes much more complex: we would maintain that she is guilty if and only if the constriction was a weak one and / or actually escapable. Establishing this is not very easy, since it involves also considerations of the psychology and the character of the actor: her moral strength or weakness, her tendency to get influenced by others, etc.

collective itself could not agree with that action and even repudiates its representatives, e.g. overthrowing them through a revolution; but also in this case international law forces the new government to take responsibility for the actions of the old government, admitting therefore the existence of a continuity in the life of the collective as a legal actor or person. This is actually a legal construction – and a questionable one – because it bases the legitimacy of a government on international recognition. So, if a tyrannical government, which is hated by its subjects, is recognized as the legitimate representative of a country by all other governments in the world, its actions will be binding also for a new, democratic government that could result from a revolution (as pointed out by Thomas Pogge<sup>5</sup>). If we consider *internal* recognition (i.e. recognition by the governed) instead of *external* recognition (i.e. recognition by other governments) as the criterion for attributing legitimacy to a government, many things would change in international law. But in this law there still prevails an idea of legitimate representation that would be never accepted on the level of national private law, because nobody would consider a person who keeps another in slavery (imposing on her his will and disposing therefore of her goods as if they were his goods) as the legitimate legal representative of this person.

Again, things are different in the case of governments which are internally recognized as legitimate, like the Nazi government, which was essentially a dictatorship and never seriously challenged by the German people: for example, there was no armed revolution or a civil war to overthrow it, even in the last months of war, except for some isolated heroic acts (such as the White Rose group in Munich) or some attempted military coups (including the one on July 10<sup>th</sup> 1944), which were directed less against the regime and more against Hitler, and which took place only after it was clear that Germany itself was in danger (as long as the German armies were winning all over Europe no single military general thought of killing Hitler or of overthrowing the regime). We could, therefore, hold that the acts committed by the Nazi government were legitimately committed in the name of the German people; and that therefore the latter holds legal responsibility for the crimes committed by the former. But also in these cases we do not consider every single member of the collective as *individually* guilty in a legal sense. On

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<sup>5</sup> In: *World Poverty and Human Rights*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2002, 146 ff.

this basis not every German, but only some of them were – and still are – put on trial after WW II for the crimes *they* committed. In such cases one differentiates between (a) individuals directly involved in these crimes, (b) individuals who knew what was going on and avoided preventing the former individuals from doing what they did, (c) individuals who knew nothing of what was going on and (d) individuals who knew and tried to do something to help the victims (like e.g. Oskar Schindler). The same distinction should guide us when we speak of *moral* guilt. There is no reason to consider all German individuals *equally* morally *guilty* for what happened then, because not in every case were the three conditions mentioned above met. This is clearly not the case for (c) and (d). And as for (b) one should consider why those individuals preferred not to act as required by the moral norms they accepted too (like e.g. the ones imposing not to harm or to kill innocent people). In any case we cannot consider *morally guilty* German individuals who were born after WW II or who were just children during the war.

Things may be different when we introduce the concept of moral responsibility – not of course in the sense of liability (which is more of a legal concept), but in the weaker sense of being responsible of a situation, which leads to morally wrong actions. This will become clear through the following examples:

- (1) If I leave my gun unguarded on a table under an open window of my house, I am morally responsible if a passer-by steals it and kills someone with it, even if I may be considered not liable legally (i.e., if there is no law requiring gun owners to guard their guns so that they do not fall into the wrong hands).
- (2) If I educate my son by planting racist and fascist ideas in his mind, I am morally responsible if later on, as a teenager, he joins a neo-Nazi group and sets on fire a house inhabited by African immigrants.
- (3) If, as an official, I lower – through a legally legitimate act – the pollution standards for factories, I am morally (if not legally) responsible for the destructive effects of the increased industrial pollution on the environment and on the population.

In all these cases we cannot say that the original actors are *guilty*, since someone else later committed the wrong acts. Nevertheless, each bears some responsibility for what happened, since each could have prevented it or may have provoked the wrongful act indirectly: if they had not acted the way they did (e.g., by leaving the gun unguarded,



raising the son as a racist, legalizing pollution) the wrong actions would not have been committed with the support of the first actor.

The above examples are cases of an individual acting – a gun-owner, a father and an elected official. Can we apply the same criteria of moral judgment to a collective? It is not easy. It is not easy even to apply these criteria to the acts of individual members of that collective. We may perhaps say that the Germans who voted for Hitler and helped him seize power can be considered morally responsible for the crimes the Nazis committed later. But may we say that *all* Germans who at that time lived in Germany – including those who voted against him – can be held morally responsible? Surely we cannot consider all them responsible *individually*: only Hitler’s supporters acted in a way that made possible the later crimes. As for the opponents, although some fled into exile, the majority remained in Germany. Are they to be considered responsible for having done nothing to stop Hitler? Is their responsibility a lesser one compared to that of his supporters? Is their responsibility strong enough to let us say that the German people on the whole may be held responsible for the Nazis crimes – for both having helped the Nazis to power (the supporters) *and* not having hindered them (the opponents)?

It is not easy to answer these questions, as shown by the endless debates on the specific question of the moral responsibility of the Germans as individuals (for a recent example see Daniel Goldhagen’s book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, and the huge discussion it started in Germany and in other countries). I do even not want to give an ultimate answer to these particular questions, for a simple reason: if we want to judge the moral responsibility of individuals, we should consider their actions individually. This would make it impossible nowadays, to give a *global* judgment on the moral responsibility of the Germans in the 30’s and 40’s: we must analyze every single case.

We cannot judge the moral responsibility of individuals as members of a collective for actions committed in the name of that collective. But maybe we can judge the moral responsibility of the collective itself. But that raises the question how may a collective be held morally – not just legally – responsible for something? A collective does not have a single will, like an individual actor. It “acts” only through its representatives, but this concerns the already mentioned cases of legal responsibility and of individual moral responsibility. Things become even more complicated when we consider the

diachronical dimension, i.e. when we consider the actual generations of a collective as being morally responsible for what former generations did. We consider then a collective exactly as it were an individual who once committed a bad action. But as I have already pointed out, there is a significant difference. If John Brown killed Susan White thirty years ago, he is still the murderer of Susan White, even if he may have repented and / or served his sentence. If the Germans killed six million Jews sixty years ago, we cannot say that the Germans living in Germany at the moment are still the murderers of those six million Jews (even if this position is held some people). We may not therefore judge the actions of a German living today in the light of what other Germans did in the past. But this is exactly what happened with our contrabassist: his bravado was considered a morally despicable act because he was a German and because of the crimes committed by Germans against Jews under Adolf Hitler. Interestingly, the personal history of the contrabassist (being a leftist) and his drunkenness were not taken into account. One gets the impression that in the eyes of public opinion he ceased to be an individual and became just a German, i.e. a member of a collective still considered morally responsible for the Holocaust. Even more interestingly, German public opinion was the most inflexible in its condemnation of the contrabassist's behavior, which is in stark contrast to the tolerance shown of the CEO.

That latest observation can help us better explain the phenomenon of sometimes considering present members of a collective to be responsible for actions committed by past members of that collective. I have two theses in this regard:

(1) Even if we do not consider the present generations responsible for what past generations did, we think that they have a moral responsibility toward the present and the future. We expect that they will do everything to avoid the past repeating itself. We expect them to preserve the memory of this past, i.e. of the crimes committed by past generations; and that they exterminate every germ which could lead to a new spreading of ideologies, opinions, and habits that were responsible for those crimes. For this reason the 'bassist got fired: he both showed "bad memory" and an appalling lack of sensitivity with regard to Hitler, the Holocaust, the historical responsibility of Germans and the sensibility of present Jews.

(2) Certain collectives include in their shared identity the moral responsibility for the wrong acts committed by past generations and therefore build a new

identity. We could say that this is exactly what happened with Germany – or more specifically, the Federal Republic of Germany that was born in 1949 from the ashes of Nazi Germany.

When we speak of the identity of a group, of a collective identity, we refer to those elements, which are shared by the members of that group, but we cannot say from the beginning *which* elements they will be. In the case of people or nations, certain elements like language, religion, etc. may play an important role. But the extent of their influence may change very much.

Let us take an historical example. In 1830 the southern territories of the United Provinces seceded and gave birth to modern Belgium on the grounds of their inhabitants' religious beliefs. These inhabitants were mostly Catholic, while those in the north (present day Netherlands) were mostly Protestant. Today, secessionist movements in Flanders threaten the territorial integrity of Belgium. Their claims are based on linguistic grounds, since Flemings speak Flemish (a variant of Dutch, i.e. of the language of the old “enemies”) and Walloons speak French. In 1830, the difference in their religion was the decisive argument, winning even over the shared language of Flanders and the Netherlands. Nowadays, language is considered the relevant element, while religion plays no role at all.

A group assumes an identity by choosing which elements are relevant in defining itself against other groups (like Catholic Belgians against Protestant Dutchmen or Flemish-speaking Flemings against French-speaking Walloons). A more correct formulation would be: a group assumes an identity when its members choose certain elements to form a self-image. This happens also in the raising of political entities like countries. This is not tantamount to pointing to a voluntary aspect in the formation of political communities, as if the social contract of the modern contractualist theories were a historical reality and not just a fiction in the context of a theory whose aim is legitimating political power. I rather would like to point out the historical dimension in which a certain community forms on the basis of the rise of a group identity among individuals who, until then, did not consider themselves as its members. And I also would like to point out that this identification, beyond not being given historically once and for all, is neither – diachronically – constant, nor – synchronically – strictly defined. In other words: It is possible that in time the shared elements of the individual conceptions that form the identity

of a group will change and eventually lead to an identity crisis. It is furthermore possible that each of the individuals forming a community has a deeply different conception of it, but that there are nevertheless enough shared elements to maintain a group identity.

This means that the composition of the community itself can change with the inclusion (or exclusion) of individuals, who until then were excluded (or included) in it, so that the members of a community can create at different times different group identities<sup>6</sup>. The problems tied to these kinds of processes are therefore not connected to the presumed fact that different communities cannot merge: History shows us the contrary. In any case, communities may very well melt into each other, unlike individuals (geo-political boundaries are immaterial, unlike the limits of the human body: a triviality that is forgotten too often). Problems arise rather from the fact that individuals are sometimes unable or unwilling to modify their perception of their community and to adapt them to the new political reality. When the Italian statesman Massimo d'Azeglio said "We have made Italy, now we have to make the Italians", he was referring precisely to this aspect: the necessity of creating in the subjects of the new-born Kingdom of Italy (which arose precisely through the merging of preexistent political communities) new conceptions of the new state entity, concepts which should make it possible for a sufficiently strong group identity to arise among them. Of course there were already people who considered themselves and their new fellow citizens as Italians, but this attitude was limited to a restricted number of individuals (sincere patriots, most intellectuals) or to certain social groups (a large part of the bourgeoisie). These individuals and groups furthermore had different motivations for their loyalty to the new political entity, and also very different conceptions of it and of the process of Italian unity (redemption from the barbaric yoke of the foreign domination for some, abolition of the inner boundaries and free trade for the others). The fact that for centuries they had inhabited the same territory (the Italic peninsula) and spoke more or less

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<sup>6</sup> For example, over the centuries the inhabitants of Florence were citizens of the Roman Empire, subjects of the margraves of Canossa, citizens of the Florentine Republic, subjects of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, subjects of the Kingdom of Italy and eventually citizens of the Italian Republic. There is no reason to think that they could not become again citizens of a re-born Florentine Republic (even if such a re-birth would represent a quite strange development).

the same language<sup>7</sup> was clearly considered not enough to engender a common feeling as Italians.

This implies a re-definition of the very concept of political community and of nation. Instead of pointing to substantial elements like territory, language, common history, etc. (elements to which the members of the group can of course point, if they want to), we should take into account those aspects of the creation of group identity which are often underestimated or neglected, like the relational dimension<sup>8</sup>. In many cases a community needs – in order to form itself – another community which it can oppose. I do not mean this in the sense of the Hegelian fight for recognition, but in the sense that it is easier to define oneself on the basis of an opposition to others. “We are not them” or “We are not like them” or simply “We do not want to be them, even if we are similar to or exactly like them” (not every separatism or particularism is based on substantial differences, i.e. on differences of culture, language, religion etc.). Once this phase has been left behind, the members of a community begin to identify itself as such on the basis of inner criteria (e.g., a common language, a common history, a common religion common political institutions, a common constitution, etc.) and not external references. (Remember that the inner criteria are always subject to possible modifications, as the previously mentioned example of Belgium shows.)

Sometimes there are communities that seem to have a persistent need to define themselves in opposition to the outside, often to an enemy. I think that the best (and most tragic) present example of this attitude is offered by the Israelis and Palestinians<sup>9</sup>. The logic of the opposition between “us” and “them” which is typical for nationalism (but also of some visions of patriotism), is the logic of a basically weak community that is unable to define itself otherwise than through a negative opposition to a rival or even an enemy from outside.

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<sup>7</sup> Actually no more than 3 % of the population spoke Italian as their first language, while the rest used dialects, which were almost unintelligible to other “Italians”.

<sup>8</sup> See I. M. Young, *Selbstbestimmung und globale Demokratie. Zur Kritik des liberalen Nationalismus*, «Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie», 46/3, 1998, 431-457.

<sup>9</sup> See H. C. Kelman, *The Political Psychology of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, «Political Psychology», 8/3, 1987, 347-363; A. Pinzani, *Interesse und Identität*, in: Jean-Christophe Merle (ed.), *Global Justice*, Stuttgart (not yet published).

But also once the identity of a group is established on the basis of inner criteria and not solely in opposition to the outside, this does not mean that such an identity is established solidly permanently. The appeal to a common culture can become vain, when relevant parts of the population do not identify themselves in it any more and prefer to appeal to alternative cultures, even if these have never existed historically. Using two beautiful images of Alexander Wendt, just as nations are metaphors whose meaning has to be defined every time by their members<sup>10</sup>, cultures are self-fulfilling prophecies which become always what they claim to be<sup>11</sup>. The nationalism of the latest 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as fascism succeeded very well in creating *a posteriori* genealogies and traditions (most of the presumed old traditions or of the folkloristic feasts held in Italy to date were indeed restored after centuries of oblivion or created *ex novo* by Italian fascism). Also political communities that have enough internal solidity (i.e., they are held together by a widely shared sense of common identity) resort often to the creation of such “myths” in order to defend themselves from external elements that they perceive as possible threats to their collective identity. This happens, for example, when German conservative politicians claim that Germany was never a country of immigration – a claim they use to advocate restrictive immigration politics against foreigners. If this myth should be accepted as true by a majority of the Germans, it would become a part of those common elements that constitute their group identity, exactly like the battle of Kosovo for the Serbs or William Tell for the Swiss: they all are myths, but they are incredibly powerful ones, and even more powerful than historical truth. This is also a way that those “imagined communities” of which Benedict Anderson speaks<sup>12</sup> form and eventually – becoming self-fulfilling prophecies – reach a reality status they never had before.

Signing his bill as “Adolf Hitler”, our musician acted not only against the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, but also against the collective identity which modern Germany has built since 1945. In my opinion this is the real explanation of the difference of the reaction that we perceive regarding the two incidents concerning the musician and the CEO. By acting the way he did, the ‘bassist broke a taboo on which the

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<sup>10</sup> A. Wendt, *Social theory of international politics*, Cambridge, 1999, p. 161.

<sup>11</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 184-ff.

<sup>12</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London / New York, 1991.

actual German identity is grounded. In a sense he attacked the basis of the collective he belonged to, and therefore German public reacted in a very emotional, negative and resolute way. The CEO, on the contrary, did nothing like this, so the public's reaction was completely different (and rather unjustifiably weak). If the Germans had removed from their collective identity the assumption of responsibility for the Nazi crimes (a responsibility they were forced to assume after the war because of their defeat), the bravado of the 'bassist would have probably gone almost unnoticed<sup>13</sup>. As a matter of fact, most crimes committed in the name of a people have never made their way into the collective identity of that people. Those crimes may have a different "quality" than the ones committed by the Nazis, but are nevertheless terrible crimes (sometimes against other groups, sometimes against individuals of the collective itself, like in the case of persecutions of political opponents). This is the reason why episodes like the one concerning our German musician are quite unusual. Imagine the New York Philharmonic on tour in a Sioux reservation, and imagine a contrabassist signing his credit card bill using the name of George Custer or of some other officer responsible for massacring Indians. Or imagine the Orchestra del Teatro alla Scala going on tour in Ethiopia and a contrabassist signing his bill using the name of Rodolfo Graziani (the commander of the Italian troops who used gas against the Abyssinians). These acts would probably cause no particular reactions in the U.S. or in Italy. And the list could go on, including, for instance, Turkey and the massacre of the Armenians, Spain and the American Indians, Great Britain and its bloody colonial wars around the world (sold by many writers like e.g. Kipling as the accomplishment of a mission of civilization), Stalin's Soviet Union and the gulags, etc. Almost every country has skeletons in its closet – crimes which are removed from the national conscience and also very often from the history books of that country. Almost

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<sup>13</sup> This is not tantamount to saying that Germans were willing to assume this responsibility, nor that they assumed it completely: for decades after the end of war the German state denied the status of victims of the Nazi crimes to some categories of prisoners of the concentration camps like gypsies or homosexuals (on the contrary: basing on § 175 of Criminal Law that was in effect at that time, German tribunals stated in the 1950s that homosexuals had been properly imprisoned in the camps as criminals). And until now the myth of the "clean war" is very powerful (according to this myth, while the regular army, the Wehrmacht, behaves in a fair way respecting the international rules of war conduct, it was only the corps created by the Nazis like the SS or the Gestapo that committed the crimes), although German public opinion was faced many times with evidences showing the contrary (such as in a very controversial exhibition on the war crimes committed by the Wehrmacht in Russia). Last but not least: In Berlin there are still streets bearing the names of minor Nazi personalities, and every attempt to change those names has failed due to the resistance of the residents.

every nation (even those with a much less bloody past as the aforementioned ones) bases its collective identity on myths, lies, self-deception and the removing of unpleasant facts. Germany has become in recent years a “normal” country in this sense, and maybe in twenty years or so an act like that of the contrabassist will be judged in the same way as that of the CEO: the bravado of a drunken guy, a peccadillo, a bad joke. Personally I wish this would never happen, and I wish also that one day acts like this and the aforementioned examples (the ‘bassist from the N.Y. Philharmonic or from the Scala) would be condemned by and provoke shame in the public opinion of the countries from which the perpetrators come. But I fear this will remain a simple wish.