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Response to *The Past Can't Heal Us*

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Lea David, *The Past Can't Heal Us. The Dangers of Mandating Memory In the Name of Human Rights* (Cambridge University Press, 2020)

I was excited at reading the title of Lea David's book—*The Past Can't Heal Us*. I thought we would finally have some useful research that would free us of the ballast of having to sift through the past and would reveal a new way forward, so I waited for the book with anticipation. It turned out my expectations were completely wrong. To put it mildly, I was shocked.

I will leave a discussion of the theoretical framework to those more competent to address it. Suffice to say, David criticises the approach to standardising memory on a global scale, claiming that insisting on the 'proper' kind of remembrance, or 'moral remembrance', can be harmful. Though she considers human rights a cause worth fighting for, she spends a lot of words convincing us that 'human rights' is an ideology and that, like any ideology, it seeks to homogenise and monopolise our vision of the world. Much like other ideologies, human rights also seek to establish their hegemony by presenting themselves as the only correct way of looking at social reality (p. 9). Human rights gradually started dictating norms at the global level, where their power and legitimacy reside, and they are being promoted and maintained by powerful nation states vis-a-vis other nation states (p. 33-34). David claims that homogenisation in the field produces even greater inequality and social division and that it is wrong to assume that 'more human rights' will lead to more equality (p. 37). The problem is exacerbated with the standardisation of memory and the rise of 'proper remembrance', and by the demands that communities adhere to certain forms, norms and values of memorialisation in the name of morality and preventing a recurrence of violence (p. 59-60). The author believes that 'moral remembrance matters greatly because the entire human rights peace industry is built on those assumptions' (p. 64). The author further emphasises that 'moral remembrance' does not contribute to upholding human rights values, but instead has the opposite effect of strengthening nationalist sentiments (p. 123).

You might be wondering what 'moral' or 'proper remembrance' means, apart from being a form of remembrance imposed from the outside. David clarifies that it is a schematic conceptualisation of past human rights abuses, based on simplified and purified categories of victims–perpetrators–bystanders, which has become an ideological infrastructure conceptualised as a universal pattern and the only framework through which memorialisation should take place (p. 62).

David is quite right to criticise approaches in which the categorisation of victims–perpetrators–bystanders is clear-cut. As she says, ‘to apply certain memorialisation standards, one has to erase complexities from categories of victim/perpetrator/bystander and keep them purified and normative. Moral remembrance requires a shift from concrete memory to abstract remembrance. This shift binds together numerous wrong assumptions and ideas that when embedded in moral remembrance produce effects opposite to those sought by human rights activists’, i.e. it leads to new forms of violence (p. 62).

One can learn from the text what should not be done under any circumstances. I was shocked, however, to realise that the author assigns responsibility for this misguided approach to dealing with the past to human rights organisations, including the organisation I work for – [Centre for Nonviolent Action \(CNA\)](#) – and to which she refers on multiple occasions. According to her, the few organisations trying to accomplish something in the field are responsible for this state of affairs.

The Past Can't Heal Us is an instance of attempting to gain attention by being scandalous (nothing new in this day and age). However, the scandal is not where the author would like to situate it (although some of her readers will fall for it). Namely, it is not in challenging the sacred cow of human rights. Sacred cows should not exist. What is scandalous is the ample academic dishonesty displayed by the author.

David cites the 2014 memorialisation standards of the UN General Assembly¹ as the source of the forms, norms and values of ‘moral remembrance’ that promote western remembrance models and countries with a difficult past are expected to comply. However, she does not direct her criticism at this report and its standards, but instead at the work of human rights organisations in Palestine and Israel and in the Balkans. She sees these organisations as extended arms of the West, putting into practice what their bosses have envisioned. This view is not new either; it is precisely what the Milošević regime’s propaganda claimed as well.

Though David is staunchly against generalisations, oversimplifications and purification, already at the beginning of the text, she boldly claims that in addition to the UN, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the OSCE, ‘every single non-governmental organisation (NGO) or human rights institution that deals with conflict areas, one way or the other, promotes an agenda that a “proper memorialisation” is essential for “healing” societies with a difficult past and for moving beyond trauma and violence’ (p. 3). I have been working in peacebuilding and on dealing with the past for the past twenty years or so, but I still couldn’t tell you what ‘moral’ or ‘proper memorialisation’ is, and I certainly do not advocate for it. It is clear to anyone with any knowledge or experience of peacebuilding that the idea of ‘proper’ remembrance is misguided. Still, according to David, this is precisely what my colleagues and I are doing.

In order to point out how misguided ‘moral remembrance’ is, David devotes most of the text to analysing various forms of dialogue encounters (trainings, seminars, study visits, etc.) organised by human rights organisations that bring together people from different sides of the conflicts in Israel and Palestine and in the Balkans. The amount of disdain she exhibits for these dialogue encounters indicates that her analysis is lacking in depth and its purpose is not entirely clear either. I say ‘disdain’, because this is the kind of language she uses to criticise the practice of organised visits to sites of suffering:

In the Balkans, this marriage of psychologised, structured, face-to-face encounters behind closed doors with emotional pilgrimages to the places of suffering appears in one form or another in almost every project... (p. 142).

¹ UN General Assembly, [Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Farida Shaheed: Memorialization processes, A/HRC/25/49](#), 2014.

In any case, she sees us as foreign elements:

After the 1990s wars, the peacebuilding and reconciliation industry imported a dialogue groups model into the former Yugoslavian countries as part of this often blurred human rights/peace agenda. This particular model of face-to-face interaction was adopted as part of a moral remembrance framework, reflecting the agenda of ‘a proper way of remembrance’ (p. 138).

I’ll skip over the ‘peacebuilding and reconciliation industry’ because I don’t know what to say to such malicious exaggeration. I do not wish to speak on behalf of all organisations – I hope they will speak for themselves – but I can speak about my organisation, the Centre for Nonviolent Action, which has been active since 1997 with offices in Sarajevo and Belgrade. We did not import any model, nor do we have any agenda of ‘proper’ or ‘moral remembrance’. We were introduced to working with groups at peace trainings in Germany, through extensive interaction with people from all corners of the world, but we did not ‘import’ any model because we are strictly against such an approach since it is an impossible fit for peacebuilding. We developed all our programmes and activities step-by-step, based on our own experiences and the feedback we received from participants. We developed many of our activities jointly with our participants. We learned from people, while working with people.

It should be noted that, although the text lumps us in with human rights organisations, we never identified ourselves as such, but clearly as a *peace* organisation. Many fail to distinguish between these two types of organisations, even though there is a clear difference. In brief, while peace organisations invest a lot of their capacities and resources into relationships and building relationships, human rights organisations do not necessarily do this because they have different priorities.

David asserts:

Here is what happens on the ground. Among the dozens of dialogue projects that promote a structured form of dealing with the past, while each has its own methodology (often very different from one another), all have in common the use of the ‘balance formula’. In all face-to-face dialogue projects, in both the Israeli–Palestinian context and in the former Yugoslav context, participants are recruited based on their ethnic/religious affiliations. This is crucial if we want to understand the creation of interaction rituals. Bringing participants together in face-to-face encounters in which they already have ascribed roles has an immediate impact on the ways in which they start forming and negotiating rituals among themselves. From the very beginning, it works as a primary set of references; in turn, the interactional rituals that evolve during the process are all seen through the prism of this structured division. In practice, this means that even those participants who have an ambiguous relationship with their ethnic/religious identity prior to the meetings are likely to become more attached to their ethnic/religious identity.

One of the main products that results from these encounters is how historical narratives become ritualised in such a way as to form clear stratifications between the groups. (p. 146)

This is completely untrue of peacebuilding programmes and runs against peace work in general, something that should be obvious to anyone with any knowledge and experience in peace work. I can say with full confidence that the process described above is nothing like what happens at events and encounters organised by the Centre for Nonviolent Action, nor is it a faithful description of other peacebuilding programmes in the region that I am familiar with. It is true that we at CNA take care to ensure that the group we bring together includes people of various identities. Interacting with different people with various identities, as well as of various ages, is very important for peacebuilding. We do not ask our participants either beforehand or during the programme which ethnic or religious group

they belong to. Some groups end up including more people with little or no expression of ethnic/religious identity, while other groups will have more participants who have a clearly expressed ethnic and/or religious identity. And that's fine. We are not imposing any identity on anyone; society has already done enough of this (through education, socialisation, various interactions, etc.). Identity is an essential topic we tackle as part of our peace education programmes. The point is that it is perfectly fine to not have a strong sense of belonging to an ethnic/religious group, just as it is perfectly fine to have a clearly expressed ethnic/religious identity. The point is to develop a better understanding of the impact of assigning identities to others. This leads to deconstructing the assumption that those without a firm attachment to any particular identity do not belong anywhere and that those with a strong ethnic/religious identity are nationalists and chauvinists. Finally, the point is that identities are not the problem; their misuse is. And this differs significantly from what David describes above. Peace work is meant to encourage people to be who they are and to support them in not perpetrating discrimination or other forms of violence.

CNA is not working to make people less Croat or Serb and more something else (how absurd!). Peacebuilding means supporting people in being who they are – be they educators, blacksmiths, Serbs, feminists, religious believers, reporters, Albanians, LGBT activists, cat lovers, Macedonians or magicians – and doing what they love without being a threat to others.

The text makes it apparent that the author does not think very highly of group work and that she believes these activities are used, for some reason, to manipulate people. Safe spaces are key for working with groups, especially very heterogeneous groups with high conflict potential. This safe space does not appear on its own; developing mutual trust requires focused and dedicated work. And it is only when we have built up enough trust that we can truly work on topics that are not easy for any of us. Trust needs to be built between participants, then between participants and programme facilitators, while trust among the facilitators has to be developed in advance. Building trust between participants and facilitators is much easier if the facilitators also participate in joint activities as part of the group, as opposed to standing on the sidelines only to observe and moderate. A safe space begins to take shape when we feel that we do not want to harm each other in any way, including by being clever.

David writes: 'From the beginning, the participants are encouraged to freely express their views on the past or the ongoing conflicts. However, under the pretence of a "safe space", they are also guided to do it in a particular way' (p. 146). This is also not true. Perhaps some 'projects' use this approach, but the Centre for Nonviolent Action certainly does not. We work on building trust and a safe space from the very beginning. Topics with high conflict potential are left for later stages when we have enough trust in each other. And the safe space is not in the scare quotes that David uses to insinuate that it is some sort of manipulative tactic.

David goes on to claim that the facilitators of these projects are also recruited based on their ethnicity. She supports her idea that dialogue encounters actually deepen differences between members of different ethnic/national/religious groups with, among other things, my statement from a paper published in 2008 where I say that an obstacle to peacebuilding is the unwritten rule among NGOs that forbids dealing explicitly with the 'crimes of others'. However, she frames this as if I were claiming that this is a common practice at all dialogue encounters, which is certainly not true. Those who do in-depth work on peacebuilding know very well how this rule can be fatal to the process of reconciliation. Also, CNA has never espoused this rule, although it was viewed as common decency. I must also point out that there is a big difference between the approaches used in the late 1990s and early 2000s and those in use today. Today, many more have the courage to equally condemn all crimes, without fear of being accused of relativism (although such accusations are still thrown about).

David goes on to describe in more detail the process that takes place at 'all these dialogue encounters':

Thrown into their ethnic identities, all participants are pushed into a role-playing that enables them to embrace their own ethnic narratives, moving from the 'I' to the 'we'. It is fascinating because, although many of the participants have, to some degree, blurred perceptions of their ethnic identities, those identities get more pronounced over the course of the meetings. In other words, those meetings bring together people who are assigned their ethnic or religious identities, lessening the importance of other possible identities, such as their gender, class, rural/urban location, profession or differences based on generational gaps, which become just a side effect of their ascribed ethnic identities. The transition from 'I' to 'we' is contextual and works as a marker for the ritualisation of their historical narratives. (p. 147)

I would say that something like this takes place in a society that is being manipulated by nationalism. Conversely, completely different processes would have to take place during encounters that take an in-depth approach to peacebuilding. At these meetings, and especially at the trainings organised by CNA, we do the very opposite: we make room for other identities to surface and we give them equal importance. One of the main principles of nonviolence is to let people be who they are, and it is up to us to learn together how to fight against discrimination and other injustices we face because of who we are. To claim that all dialogue encounters function as described above is bizarre and certainly untrue.

One of the keys to successful dialogue is creating a space where everyone can speak as an 'I' without having to hide behind a 'we'. We have grown up with 'we' statements – sometimes they are not significantly present in our environments or in public discourse, and sometimes we are completely surrounded by them. And we need time to practice engaging in dialogue where we will express/hear individual experience from the 'I' perspective instead of national/ethnic narratives. When we manage that, we have opened up our hearts to others.

Convinced that face-to-face encounters and dialogue projects manipulate participants, David writes that 'structured face-to-face encounters are artificial environments that need to stage and, in many ways, manipulate participants' feelings' (p. 159). Anyone with any knowledge of peace work knows how misguided this approach would be. Any manipulation of participants would not only be extremely unethical and diametrically opposed to the principles of nonviolence, but could never contribute to peacebuilding.

Emotional energy is key for building relationships, the author says (p. 163). On that we can agree. She cites part of what is a powerful account by the war veteran and peace activist, and my current colleague, Amer Delić who participated in a series of encounters between war veterans and hosted a visit of veterans from the region to Zavidovići. In his account,² Amer writes about what meeting the veterans meant for him and describes how one of the veterans from what used to be the enemy army asked to come visit again and bring a few others to show them the Memorial Room in Zavidovići. When the man showed up with two strangers, Amer describes his discomfort and everything that went through his head, and how he then calmed down once he realised the two men had come looking for their missing, hoping to find a trace in the Memorial Room... The author discounts all of this and only takes from Amer's account the description of his discomfort and fear when first encountering these strangers in order to support her idea that 'anxiety and fear that the meeting [with war veterans] might develop into a conflict left a strong emotional impact on him'. At the end of his account, Amer explains how he would have felt had he not met and worked with war veterans from different sides and how these encounters helped him, but David decided to neglect his perspective, opting instead to assign him her own, because the aim is to show how counterproductive dialogue encounters are. Everything from Amer's account that counters her own ideas is left out. This approach indicates a complete disregard for understanding people, their fates, the burden they carry and their needs. And let me make this clear: no, encounters do not serve to deepen conflict, the conflict is already there –

2 Amer Delić's text 'Awakening' is available in [13. CNA Annual Report](#), 2010, p. 39-40.

these people have survived a war. Encounters between people may be awkwardly or inaptly facilitated and may thus cause additional discomfort or even erupt in an incident, but they can hardly cause a conflict that already exists, even if it is just lying dormant.

The author concludes: 'The evaluation of such face-to-face encounters shows very limited and narrow transformations in the long run. In practice, this means that the ethnic categories of the groups have just gained additional weight, not the other way around' (p. 165). Perhaps the available evaluations do not provide enough information about what happens to the participants in the long run. In that case, it would be more honest to talk to the people who have attended such events, or to the organisers, and to at least make an attempt at getting a first-hand impression. A sweeping generalisation that this is not useful and is in fact counterproductive can cause real harm and, I assure you, is untrue. Not to mention that it runs in the face of any kind of ethics.

David is deeply convinced that the encounters are doomed to fail and that the solidarity that develops among the participants easily fades away or gets hijacked by the state. One of the reasons for this, according to David, is that when the participants leave the artificial environment of the encounter and return to their communities, they lack the infrastructure needed to maintain this vision of human rights, while constantly running up against nationalist infrastructure. The other reason is that human rights organisations promoting memorialisation based on 'moral remembrance' (quotes mine) foster misconceptions that further enforce nationalist sentiments (p. 166).

Fortunately, not all is lost, David tells us, for there are reports of progress, but only in Israeli-Palestinian relations, and only among Jews, and not among the participants but among facilitators who report having undergone a change, while the Palestinians mostly avoid reporting, or even report no change at all. The author claims that the situation is similar in BiH, Croatia, and Serbia, though she also points out the lack of systematic research on this issue for the Balkans context. She does not, however, inform us of the basis for her bold assertion that things are similar in the Balkans, not even citing any personal experience of participation in one of these disastrous programmes that just sow divisions among people and enforce nationalism. She has this to say about the Balkans: 'Whereas there is no evidence that one particular side becomes more prone to human rights actions, we clearly see that those who succeed in maintaining the activity are mostly those who were human rights promoters to start with, or those who find a way to make a living out of it.' I do not 'clearly see' this and would appreciate some information about where exactly this can be seen. My experience working in the region with various groups over the past twenty something years is completely different.

David is convinced that most of the effects of the encounters are very soon lost and forgotten and that participants return to their usual negative behaviours and stereotypes. In order to prove that this does indeed also transpire in the Balkans, she makes use of a single sentence from the 2001 CNA evaluation report and writes that, 'Only eight out of thirty participants were willing to answer the CNA's request to participate in the survey three years after their training (CNA 2001 : 14) or to engage in some more meaningful action' (p. 172).

True, when we conducted this internal evaluation (but not, as David assumes, for the sake of 'Europeanisation' or 'the demand for transparency' (p. 143), i.e. not because someone made us do it, but because we needed to take stock of our work), we only received eight responses to the questionnaires we sent out by e-mail. Back then, in 2000 and 2001, online communication was still not widespread: only a few people had their own e-mail address and others mostly used e-mail addresses from friends, relatives, neighbours or their organisation. Incredibly, the main means of written communication back then was the fax, and again not via your own fax machine at home, but a fax machine you had access to at a local company or organisation. Conducting an evaluation under such circumstances, when we did not have the resources to visit all these people, was too demanding in terms of logistics. So, we settled for just eight responses. As internet access became more widespread, it became easier for us to organise and innumerable opportunities opened up. We no longer encounter such difficulties in our

evaluations. I'm afraid that David is not interested in this, though; it seems that she is satisfied with pulling a sentence or two out of context and assigning them whatever meaning fits her purpose.

We would have had much to tell her about what happens to people after some time (a few years) following encounters/trainings with a diverse group of people, but in this case, we were never asked. Some of this information can be found in our evaluation reports. We at CNA realised quite early on how easy it was to lose touch with people after a while, and that concrete peacebuilding work was hampered by a lack of infrastructure people could rely on. This does not in the slightest mean that they rush towards nationalist infrastructures. People who worked in education and reporters found it easier to incorporate peace work into their environments. In any case, we made an effort to keep in touch at least with those who were most interested and showed initiative. The cooperation we established led to many other activities we later implemented. In practice, no activity implemented by CNA is without people who participated in our trainings or other types of encounters.

David is convinced that the Centre for Nonviolent Action works with war veterans only under a particular key: treating them as perpetrators who are deserving our support only when they are willing to be publicly transformed into peacebuilders (p. 179). This is an absolute fabrication and a malicious misinterpretation based on prejudice. All our texts, reports and publications dealing with this topic speak to the very opposite, including those the author included in her bibliography. The author characterises our claims that the veterans we worked with were highly motivated to meet those they fought against in the war as 'alleged' and 'misleading'. In serious research, labels such as 'alleged' and 'misleading' would have to be based on sound insights, data and analysis, which is not the case here. The author also claims that the number of veterans willing to participate in 'such projects' was extremely small. As evidence, she cites an unknown number of interviews she conducted with veterans at an unknown location from '2019 to 2012' (according to a footnote).

Cooperation requires at least some level of mutual trust. The population of war veterans, especially veterans in Serbia, is, to say the least, reserved towards non-governmental organisations. And also towards researchers. Towards anyone, really, seen as 'sticking their nose where it doesn't belong'. In addition to common human mistrust, when it comes to war veterans, these reservations are also related to their fear of being unjustly accused of war crimes simply for having participated in the war. That is why, before they decide to participate in an activity, we invest a great deal of effort into building trust. However, when they do show up for an activity, most report being motivated by meeting combatants from other sides, and not the opportunity to participate in a public event, talk about the war, or anything else. The motivation to meet 'the others' ranges across the spectrum from 'Why did we ever let this happen?' to 'Now I'm going to tell you straight to your face!'. Is our experience of this 'alleged' and 'misleading' as the author would have it? I don't know what David asked war veterans from Serbia and what it was they said that led her to conclude that the number of veterans interested in 'such projects' was extremely small. It matters who asks the question (Does this person have credibility and legitimacy? Does this person inspire respect or suspicion?), and how and what is being asked (what kind of cooperation is being offered). I am not disputing the claim that few war veterans would be willing to cooperate with the author of this book; I am disputing taking this as licence to derive general conclusions from personal experience, despite all evidence to the contrary.

Almost everything I have said about the work of CNA in this response can be found in our numerous publications, reports and evaluations, because we strive to document our work as much as we can, both for ourselves and for others who may be interested to know more about the work of peacebuilding. The author includes some of these documents in her bibliography. However, she disregards anything that does not fit her theory, and apparently has no qualms about pulling things out of context and assigning them a different meaning. Indeed, I consider her claims that the work of CNA deepens divisions among people or enforces nationalism unexamined, wholly ungrounded, and even

malicious. It is interesting that she devoted quite a lot of space to us in her text, but not once did she reach out to hear our opinion or any clarification of our work, context or dilemmas.

Since the author spent quite a bit of energy in the text criticising dialogue encounters that, as it turns out, she is not entirely familiar with, she has left us without further explanation of her initial claim that dealing with the past will not help us either prevent violence or uphold human rights in the future. Except for a brief remark claiming insufficient evidence (p. 64). At the same time, the book *The Past Can't Heal Us* offers no way out, no hope.

We started working on dealing with the past not because we are particularly partial to such difficult tasks or because the 'evil West' made us, but because in our work on peacebuilding we kept coming up against the wall of the past. Unfortunately, we must seek out what to do with that past in order to be able to live decently and make sure that the past does not become our children's future.

Translated by Ulvija Tanović