

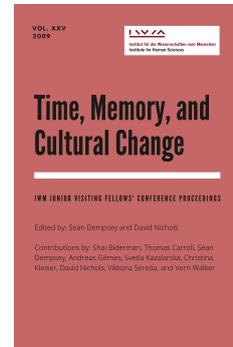
# Avishai Margalit's Idea of an Ethics of Memory and its Relevance for a Pluralistic Europe

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## Preview

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I would like to present the idea of an Ethics of Memory and how the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit dealt with it in his book *The Ethics of Memory* (2004) [1]. In this perspective, I want to discuss one of Margalit's key concepts—that is “shared memory”—and its relevance for a pluralistic Europe, which brings me to reflect on the possibility of a so-called “culture of memory” in the European context.

My paper is divided into five sections. In the first section I will give some information about the conceptual framework on which my argumentation is based, such as the meaning of memory and how this complex concept relates to the notion of culture. This happens in light of the fact that there is—especially in the German speaking research context—an increasing interest in “cultures of memory.” Focusing attention on the concept of a “shared memory,” my second section aims at initiating a critical discussion about Margalit's book. On this account, I will introduce some of the philosopher's essentials, such as the distinction between “ethics” and “morality” and his idea of “encompassing groups” that are crucial for an adequate understanding. After a short review of Margalit's book, in the third section I will question whether it makes sense to transpose Margalit's *Ethics*, in my opinion strongly grounded in the Jewish society in Israel, into a pluralistic Europe or not. What are, or should be, the consequences of such a transfer and application in view of the various actual endeavors to create a specific “European culture of memory”? Keeping these problems in mind, the fourth section of my paper focuses in particular on the relationships among the three different concepts of memory in Margalit's outline, namely the “collective memory,” the “common memory,” and the “shared memory.” Drawing attention to some linguistic aspects concerning the specific meaning of *collective*, *common* and *shared*, in the fifth and final section I want to deal further with the concept of a “shared memory” as a key question of memory work

that relates to different narrations of conflicts due to a totalitarian and criminal past; what I mean is a totalitarian and criminal past, which today affects both people originally from European and non-European countries.

My special interest here as an historian is to examine in what sense the concept of memory work, elaborated on against the background of Margalit's philosophical thinking, has to be considered as a fundamental term for historical research and historiography that recognizes its role as a critical authority: that is exploring data, providing interpretations and explanations and thus orientation concerning a conflictive past from a scholarly point of view. My claim is that history—as an academic discipline—plays an essential role in the complexity of memory work aiming at a real culture of, I would rather say, understanding—a “culture of understanding”—which, especially argued in the historical context of Europe, is to be based on democratic principles of peaceful coexistence and mutual recognition of more than one so-called “culture of memory” in the world.

## 1. Some Remarks on the Conceptual Framework

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One might ask why I am interested in political as well as ethical and moral considerations on memory such as Margalit has dealt with in a significant range of his socio-philosophical works during the last ten years. In my opinion, historians, like any person endowed with the power of judgment, inevitably take political and moral decisions and make evaluations in their everyday work. This happens less rather than more explicitly, frequently not being aware of the epistemic and deontic consequences of the historians' work. In doing so, up to now, historians often rely on a diffuse meaning of historical objectivity.[2] It is this personal perception that encourages me to emphasize these neglected aspects of the political and the ethical. Therefore, in my transdisciplinary study I intend to conceptualize the notion of memory work, raising the question of its specific relevance for history with particular respect to its political and ethical dimension.

Regarding the misleading debate about the primacy of “history” over “memory” or vice versa, my argumentation starts from the basic assumption that history *grounds* and *ends* in memory. But in order not to oversimplify the still ongoing “history and memory” debate, it is important to see that I am dealing with two fundamentally differing meanings of memory: First and foremost, I hold the view that history in the sense of historical research and historiography—as any kind of knowledge—*grounds* the human faculty of memory or recollection. In other words, the human faculty of memory is the *conditio sine qua non* of the *historie*. To say, in addition, that history *ends* in memory means to focus on the fact that one of the main functions of historiography is to give evidence of something that seems worth remembering—and not least of all, it is notable that we “do history” not just because of our subjects but also because *we* want to be remembered with our works. Memory in this sense of remembrance, whether preserving or critical, is always and already instrumentalized memory.

Taking into account these two meanings of memory, I pursue an approach that regards the academic business of history as a specialized form of memory work—instead of ignoring and separating out the concept of memory from historical research or, on the contrary, of blurring the boundary and seeing the categories of history and memory as something identical.

As has often been mentioned, we are currently witnessing a boom of so-called “memory discourse” in the fields of historical research and cultural studies. There have been various attempts at theorizing the concept of memory, as well as analyzing “collective memories,” “cultural memories” or “cultures of memory,” but still we lack a more systematic insight into the subjects’ ethical and political dimensions. However, one can observe that many empirical studies in the interdisciplinary realm of “memory research” (“*Gedächtnisforschung*”) and “mnemohistory” (“*Gedächtnisgeschichte*”) ignore the normative weight of their subject. They pursue an allegedly “pure” descriptive path, dealing with “collective memories” as analytical categories on the one hand and as a real given on the other hand.

Bearing in mind that there is a confusing variety of different conceptions of so-called “collective memories,” I propose we should be more careful in constructing and theorizing such compound terms. In particular, when focusing on the idea of a “culture of memory” and its normative dimension, implied by the notion of culture itself, we should try to be aware of its political and ethical implications. In other words: If we agree on defining “culture” as social practice, ordered by a complex, more or less habitualized system of common principles and rules coordinating the “life-world” (“*Lebenswelt*”) of social agents, we need to find out whether there are *intersubjective criteria* about the specific quality of a so-called “culture of memory” or not. Otherwise it might be easy to identify an endless number of such cultures, which have nothing in common except to be a fashionable and therefore lucrative research topic.

In my opinion, the term “culture of memory” demands for a distinctive regularity of how individuals consciously remember and commemorate their identity-relevant past in the social context—not in isolation, but always interacting in groups. In that sense related to the pluralistic and multicultural Europe, the concept of a “culture of memory” entails a series of fundamental, yet unsolved questions—or, to put it differently, the notion of a “culture of memory” challenges both political and moral theory on the one hand and sociological and historical research on the other.

These preliminary considerations induce me to assume memory work as an essential part of a “culture of memory” rather in the sense of a possible “culture of understanding” and more specifically in terms of an *intersubjective project* that is motivated by the historical experiences in the 20th century as a century of wars, genocides, oppression, and expulsion. The following synopsis of Margalit’s book *The Ethics of Memory* should be seen against this research background.

## 2. Margalit’s Ethics

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Avishai Margalit was born in Palestine in 1939 and grew up in Jerusalem, where he is a Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Hebrew University. At present he seems to be the only person who has elaborated on the idea of an ethics of memory in a more or less methodical way. This is at least what the title of his book *The Ethics of Memory* suggests. Nevertheless, the philosopher opens his study with the question: “Is there an ethics of memory?” and thereby drives forward his subject of examination by evocating a series of questions like, “Are we obligated to remember people and events from the past?” and “If we are, what is the nature of this obligation? Are remembering and forgetting proper subjects of moral praise or blame? Who are the ‘we’ who may be obligated to remember: the collective ‘we’, or some distributive sense of ‘we’ that puts the obligation to remember on each and every member of the collective?” (Margalit 2004, 6-7).

Margalit emphasizes in his *Ethics* that memory “applies primarily to individuals” (Margalit 2004, 48). However, turning back to the questions mentioned before, he answers: “Let us understand the *we* as the collective or communal we.” Therefore, Margalit concludes, the “ethics of memory” is the “ethics of collective memory” (Margalit 2004, 48). I understand this assertion in the sense that an ethics of memory is required precisely when people interact in social contexts. Moreover, I would sharpen Margalit’s claim that memory applies not *primarily* but *principally* to individuals as social agents. Memory work, as I understand the concept, is inherently connected to the individuals’ faculty of memory. If *we*—as family members, citizens or members of any other group—have any obligation to remember, then I would just accept Margalit’s approach that a distributive sense of “we” puts an obligation to remember on each member of the so-called collective.

But before embarking deeper on the analysis of Margalit’s idea of an ethics of memory, which is quite complex, it seems necessary to point to the limitation of my study here. It is not my aim to deconstruct Margalit’s philosophical argumentation, nor am I able to present a counter-proposal of an ethics of memory. What I propose to do is to focus on some of his central ideas and concepts—as far as they are stimulating for my own theoretical approach.

As I said at the very beginning, there are two essential ideas generally characterizing Margalit’s philosophical thinking: First, there is his specific distinction between ethics and morality, which gives information about the scope or the social unit, so to speak, that we are looking for. To designate this distinction Margalit needs a further one between two types of human relations: “thick relations” and “thin relations.”

“Morality, in my usage,” he states, “ought to guide our behavior toward those to whom we are related just by virtue of no other attribute. These are our thin relations. Ethics, in contrast, guides our thick relations.” (Margalit 2004, 37) Furthermore he specifies that “[t]hick relations are grounded in attributes of parent, friend, lover, fellow-countryman.” They are “anchored in a shared past or moored in shared memory. Thin relations, on the other hand, are backed by the attribute of being human, such as being a woman or being sick. Thick relations are in general our relations to the near and dear. Thin relations are in general our relations to the stranger and the remote.” (Margalit 2004, 7)

Thus, we recognize: Ethics is a matter of “thick relations.” There is no place to discuss now whether Margalit’s distinction between ethics and morality, based on the distinction between “thick” and “thin relations” is convincing or just realistic (one might wonder, for instance, and in spite of Margalit’s andocentric view, how any old fellow-countryman could be one of our “near and dear”). But we should be aware of the idea’s importance within his philosophical framing when we focus on a second essential: the idea of an “encompassing group” (paraphrased in German as “*identitätsstiftende Gruppe*”).

The concept of an “encompassing group” concerns once again the social unit, wherein an “ethics of memory” affects our “thick relations.” Margalit identifies so-called “encompassing groups” as something given; and he insists on the current relevance of “encompassing groups” for all human beings (see Margalit and Raz 1990; Margalit 1996). According to Margalit, it is a matter of fact that each and everyone belongs to one or more “encompassing groups,” which play a central part in constituting personal identity. Additionally, Margalit characterizes an “encompassing group” by its own culture in the sense of a distinct “way of life.” As far as I can see, the philosopher does not deal explicitly with the term of an “encompassing group” in his *Ethics*. But if one wants to find a deeper reason for Margalit’s usage of “community” and “culture” in general, and for “community of memory” and “culture of memory” in particular, and if one wants to understand how these concepts are based on the idea of “thick relations,” one has to have a look at his previous studies.

At first glance, Margalit’s idea of an ethics of memory, graphically converted into a “triangle of relations” (first connecting “memory” with “caring,” second connecting “caring” with “ethics,” and third connecting “ethics” with “memory”) looks simple. But what makes Margalit so difficult to read is his personal usage of concepts and terms that are well known both in ordinary and in philosophical language. Margalit enriches these concepts and terms with a third layer of his own meaning (see for example the concept of “encompassing groups”). Thus, for an adequate understanding of Margalit’s argumentation there is an urgent need to clarify his conceptual equipment in an accurate manner. In my opinion, such a clarification requires more information on Margalit’s biographical and intellectual background than I can give here. It is, for example, important to know about his personal political engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and how deeply the complex problem of an Israeli society with all its “encompassing groups” (the Ultra-Orthodox Jews, the Israeli Arabs, etc.) influences his way of thinking. Therefore, we have to contextualize Margalit’s concepts, used in *The Ethics of Memory*, within his larger political and socio-philosophical scope and against his biographical background.

However, I summarize: The “community of memory” is based on “thick relations.” “Thick relations,” as we have seen, are “anchored in a shared past or moored in shared memory.” “Shared memory,” in turn, is based on mutual “caring.” And “caring,” this essential criterion of Margalit’s *Ethics*, generally motivated by “thick relations,” designates the connecting link between “ethics” and “memory” within the triangle of relations.

### **3. Raising Questions Concerning a Pluralistic Europe**

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Concerning the actual European framework of diasporian-multiculturalism and migration movements and—at the same time—the various efforts to establish “cultures of memory,” usually attributed to an *imagined community* called “nation,” the important question should be whether it is *possible* and at all *desirable* to conceive a “European culture of memory,” which is not just accepted by one or several “communities of memory,” based on Margalit’s idea of “thick relations”; but which would be recognized by all—or at least a majority of—residents living in Europe. Moreover, I raise the question: If not grounded in “thick relations,” then how should principles and values be formulated in order to guarantee peaceful coexistence and mutual recognition of more than one “culture of memory” in the world? In other words: There are a number of politicians and intellectuals, historians as well as artists and writers, who pursue and represent a variety of differing political and cultural conceptions of Europe, negotiating and deliberating on a European *culture of remembrance and commemoration*. In what way could and should the idea of an ethics of memory affect this ongoing process of establishing such a culture? If there is, for example, discussion about an already existing “European culture of memory,” expected to be based on the historical experience of the National Socialist crimes: Is it clear to whom and how such a culture should apply, if we take into account that many European residents are no longer biographically or generationally related to National Socialism, for instance due to their migration backgrounds of coming from non-European countries like the former Yugoslavia, Turkey and the African States? Or should moral and political considerations on a “European culture of memory” only lead to formal guidelines of rights and duties concerning the freedom of identity-relevant remembrance and commemoration in Europe?

By reading critically the philosopher’s ethical program, I would like to concentrate on the following detailed set of questions:

1. Is it *possible* to apply Margalit’s idea of an “ethics of memory” to concrete situations outside of Israeli society? Or is the scope of his *Ethics* intended to be limited to the Israeli society, as Margalit suggested in his previous book concerning his ambitious project of a *Decent Society* (see Margalit 1996)?
2. If it is *possible* to apply Margalit’s outline to another place or country, then is it at all *desirable* to transpose it to the European pluralistic framework?
3. If it seems to be *possible* as well as *desirable* to apply Margalit’s ethical outline in general, then in what way do his central concepts require a specific modification? What are or should be the consequences of such a transfer and application, if we take the coexistence of more than one “culture of memory” into consideration?

In this paper I will not deal with these fundamental questions in a systematic way, nor am I able to provide concise answers. But the problematic, which I tried to outline, at least suggests that there is a need to clarify the ambit within which and for whom Margalit’s *Ethics* is valid. And a first response is that the universal aspiration, which underlies my inquiry, would require sound reasons and adequate means to make it work, and at least a precise concept of what “memory work” stands for and how it could relate to the idea of “shared memory.”

I propose, therefore, to deal further with the concept of a “shared memory” in the last section of this paper. It turned out to be the most fruitful concept with respect to my own efforts of theorizing the notion of memory work. In this perspective, I would like to draw attention now to three different concepts of “memory” in Margalit’s *Ethics*, namely the “collective memory,” the “common memory” and the “shared memory.”

#### 4. “Collective Memory,” “Common Memory,” and “Shared Memory”

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“A common memory,” Margalit states, “is an aggregate notion. It aggregates the memories of all those people who remember a certain episode which each of them experienced individually.” According to Margalit, “shared memory” denotes more than “a simple aggregate of individual memories.” The crucial point is that “[shared memory] requires communication.” Following Margalit, “A shared memory integrates and calibrates the different perspectives of those who remember the episode [...] into one version.”

Subsequently he writes: “shared memory in a modern society travels from person to person through institutions, such as archives, and through communal mnemonic devices, such as monuments and the names of streets” (Margalit 2004, 51-54). In consequence, Margalit specifies “tradition” as a “form of shared memory” and furthermore “collective memory” as another “form of shared memory” (Margalit 2004, 61-63).

In my opinion, there is something puzzling regarding the relationships among these three forms of memory, which Margalit introduces in his *Ethics*. In attempting to elucidate the conceptual confusion, I suggest it could be helpful to consider some linguistic aspects concerning the specific meaning of what designates “collective,” “common,” and “shared.”

Linguistically the adjective “collective” signifies that someone or something refers or relates to a collective (like the adjective “national” relates to the nation).[3] Therefore, a “collective memory” denotes primarily a memory that relates to a collective. “Collective memory” is not essentially “common memory,” nor is it memory that we necessarily share (but we could, under certain conditions). So, if we deal with the term “collective” in the pure meaning proposed, then we should talk about “collective memories” on a very general level, which is only possible by abstraction of human individualism and diversity (cf. Kandel 2006, 240; besides, the same goes for the compound term “collective experience”). Consequently, I do not agree with Margalit’s claim that “collective memory” is a form of “shared memory.”

Concerning the distinction between “common” and “shared,” I propose to step back, once again, to Margalit’s assertion that a “common memory [...] aggregates the memories of all those people, who remember a certain episode, which each of them experienced individually.” I suggest that “common memory” is restricted to a certain *co-presence*, which is linked to “primary experience” (since I hold the view that the distinction between “primary experience” and “secondary experience,” provided by Koselleck 2002, is fruitful although not unproblematic). The concept of “shared memory,” in contrast to “common

memory,” and according to Margalit, implies *communication* about certain episodes and / or experiences. At this point, I would like to further develop Margalit’s idea of “shared memory.”

## 5. Reflecting “Shared Memory”

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It seems remarkable that *communication*, which, according to Margalit, is essential for a “shared memory,” is translated in German as “*Verständigung*”—a metalinguistic term that means more than a simple exchange of information. The German translation brings about a semantic shift. Regarding the mentioned endeavors to create a specific “European culture of memory,” I propose that we could imagine a process of communication, in the sense of understanding (“*Verständigung*”), that is guided by the idea of shared memory—and this process would be more than the one tied to the tradition of a so-called “collective memory” (cf. Margalit 2004, 96-99) . Moreover, to achieve “shared memory,” episodes and experiences are not necessarily linked to “primary experience” but to a certain *consensus* about how an episode and / or experience could or should be remembered, especially if there exists more than one version of a conflictive past. Therefore, deliberation on and commemoration of certain episodes / experiences, whether experienced as “primary” or not, could, under certain conditions, lead to the idea of a “shared memory”—even if these episodes or experiences relate to the dead, and to people whom we have never known personally (Margalit uses here the phrase of “a memory of memory”).[4]

In my opinion, there is an emancipatory reason for paying attention to this possible process leading from communication to the idea of shared memory. But my assumption is that within a pluralistic European framework the conception of a “community of memory,” based on “thick relations,” as Margalit defines them, is no guarantee for this process to be successful. Mutual recognition and empathy—since I prefer this notion to that of Margalit’s “caring”—even if these competences are based on “thick relations,” cannot be taken for granted. In my view, a specific *quality of communication*, directed by a moral principle, is required, and memory work is a constitutive part of this discursive process (what I have in mind is a kind of historically situated Discourse Ethics that does not dispense the idea of the Kantian moral law) . Moreover, my proposition is that memory work is particularly essential to social and political constellations which seem to provide no common ground for communication due to a criminal or conflictive past. Consequently, I would claim that instead of the communitarian vision of “thick relations” the human *will towards communication and moral reflection* as a minimal principle of cooperation should be considered to be a prerequisite for “shared memory”—if we take this conception of memory as a kind of the Kantian “regulative idea.”

Referring now to the two Stockholm Declarations in 2000 and 2004[5] that affirm the National Socialist crimes to be a fundamental challenge to the foundation of civilization, I would like to draw attention to the cosmopolitan aspiration which underlies the Stockholm Declarations, and which is supported by the universal values of the Convention of Human Rights and the condemnation of so-called “crimes against humanity.” In the cosmopolitan sense of the Stockholm Declarations, I agree with the assumption that the

cruelty of National Socialism mass murder has to be a paradigmatic point of reference for the human rights policy after 1945 (cf. Levy and Sznajder 2007, 190-191), but actually I am rather skeptical about recent predications on the “globalization of the Holocaust memory.”

While recognizing the paradigmatic role of the National Socialist crimes within the history of humanity, the crucial point today is to achieve a common interest among European residents in coming to terms with any form of a totalitarian and criminal past aiming at avoiding and preventing any form of genocidal acting. Hence, sensitive forms of social learning are required, using epistemic, social-psychological *and* historical means of contrasting and comparing people’s actual experiences of war, mass murder and expulsions with the cruelties of the Nazi past. Such a comparison has to focus both on differences and similarities, avoiding unacceptable equations and the setting off of crimes and experiences against each other. Memory work, as I understand the concept, denotes in this context the *agency* to communicate both in an historical-critical and moral-reflective manner about conflictive events in the past. It is this discursive potential—instead of “thick relations”—that we should enforce, that enables people to act socially; and it is historical research and historiography that represents an indispensable authority of enlightened criticism in the described discursive interactions focusing on the regulative idea of a “shared memory,” a topic we should not mix up with and narrow down to political rhetoric of commemoration.

The ability to act socially is a precondition for entering an intersubjectively accepted process of negotiating and deliberating on disputed validity claims (*strittige Geltungsansprüche*) about conflictive events in the past. But how to turn a process of negotiation and deliberation into a real process of understanding is not obvious. It requires conscious work, termed quite rightly “memory work”; and it is this *work-in-process* performed by social agents that could lead to the common vision of a “shared memory”—even if we take into account the multicultural diversity of Europe.

## Conclusion

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It was one of my intentions to sensitize some specific problems of an ethics of memory—in particular, when we are “doing history,” analyzing and negotiating people’s earlier experiences, expectations, and hopes as something distilled into what we call “historical experience” or “collective memory.” Therefore, my tentative and preliminary answer to the still outstanding question of whether it makes sense to transpose Margalit’s *Ethics* into a pluralistic European framework or not, is that such an application requires at least a consistent contextual re-thinking of his stimulating ideas and concepts. This claim may become clearer if one remembers Margalit’s narrow usage of the notion of “ethics” connected to the idea of “thick relations.” Thus the second section of my paper was designated to set out the scope within which Margalit’s *Ethics* should be operative and for whom his *Ethics* should be valid. In this context I pointed out that the “encompassing group” as a central category of Margalit’s thinking is implicitly related to the idea of a “community of memory” and therefore relevant to Margalit’s conception of a “shared memory.” Finally, by presenting three quite similar-looking but nonetheless controversial

forms of memory, asking how we could distinguish among them, I proposed a modified, more realistic conception of “shared memory,” taking seriously Margalit’s assertion that “shared memory” requires communication.

“Shared memory” in this modified sense of meaning is a form of memory that cannot be taken for granted, for example as Margalit states, in tradition or fixed in monuments or names of streets. From my point of view, it is rather a common vision. “Shared memory,” as I tried to point out, could be seen as a kind of “regulative idea,” something intersubjectively desirable. To give evidence to the process of communication and deliberation by focusing on a common vision called “shared memory” certainly challenges critical historical research and theory.

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### *Notes:*

1. *The Ethics of Memory* was first published in German translation under the title *Ethik der Erinnerung* (Margalit 2000), not in Hebrew and not in English. Originally it was based on three lectures, given in Frankfurt am Main on May 17-19, 1999. In my paper I refer to the revised and extended English edition (= Margalit 2004, first published 2002). This last edition contains—in comparison with the German one—three additional chapters and an introduction which can be read as a comprehensive presentation of Margalit’s basic assumptions.

2. See the contributions in *History and Theory*, Theme issue 43 (December 2004), on “Historians and Ethics.”

3. Nota bene: On the one hand, a collective is always an imagined community, and in addition to that it can also be a real one. On the other hand, it is to say that every real community is at the same time an imagined community; see Kleiser 2006, p. 90.

4. Regarding the huge amount of today’s interdisciplinary memory research, it seems heuristically useful to me to distinguish between “common memory” and “shared memory” following the criteria of *co-presence* and *communication*, whereas, from an epistemological point of view, I would not differentiate between the concepts

of “common experience” and “shared experience”; at the time we assumedly negotiate experiences aiming at something like “shared experience,” in fact, we agree on memories—which each of us always and already experienced individually.

5<sub>2</sub> See URL: <http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/about/index.php?content=stockholm/> (= Stockholm Declaration in 2000) and URL: <http://www.preventgenocide.org/prevent/conferences/StockholmDeclaration28Jan2004.htm> (= Stockholm Declaration in 2004).

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