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Reviewed by Irit Dekel (Indiana University Bloomington) Published on H-Judaic (December, 2020) Commissioned by Barbara Krawcowicz (Jagiellonian University)

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Learning from the Germans came out last summer, stimulating an important discussion about Germany’s reckoning with its past as a model for a much-needed honest confrontation with the legacy of slavery and the persistent presence of racism in the United States. I am writing this review as two very different debates about racism and the legacies of colonialism and slavery play out in the US and Germany, themselves a repercussion in elite discourses of very different movements in the streets of the two societies. In the US, demonstrations have engulfed cities and smaller communities across the country in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis by a white police officer. In Germany, the media is buzzing with arguments and counterarguments after the call from Felix Klein, the German Federal Commissioner for “Jewish life in Germany and the fight against Antisemitism,” for the organizers of the Ruhrtrinalle festival to withdraw their invitation for philosopher Achille Mbembe to give an opening lecture. Klein and others accused Mbembe of relativizing and trivializing the Holocaust in his writing on the legacy of colonialism. Susan Neiman, the director of the Einstein Forum, an independent research center in Potsdam, has been a central and bold voice in advocating for a universalist approach to racism, which encourages a close look at the particularities of each case in order to draw moral conclusions with which both societies will be able to better face their own racism.

Neiman’s book critically and eloquently describes the long and bumpy road to German culture’s reckoning—first through civil society activism and later with state recognition and support— with its murderous past, as a model for the US to face its murderous past and present without claiming that the two, the Holocaust and US slavery and racial discrimination, are historically the same. This review appears about a year after the book was published and celebrated in the US and the UK and three months after it was published in German. In all three cultures it has sparked a timely discussion about the importance of learning from past atrocities through which memory work might enable a thriving plural democracy. I enjoyed reading the book, first and foremost, as an invitation to think about memory work and its power to heal as well as to divide societies.

The book’s first and second parts are descriptive. The first is composed of three chapters, and tells the stories of “German Lessons.” The second part, chapters 4-6, is called “Southern Discomfort” and focuses on horrifying racial violence, structural and legalized discrimination and humiliation after the Civil War, and the ideologies that stir it. The third part, titled “Setting Things Straight,” is
prescriptive, with three chapters in which Neiman makes an argument as to why it is necessary to recognize the power of monuments and discuss rights and reparations followed by a conclusion titled “In Place of Conclusions.”

My review will discuss three questions: (1) Which Germans? (2) Did the Germans learn from the Germans? (3) How can “we” learn from each other, where the “we” refers to everyone interested in thinking critically about racism and discrimination?

(1) Which Germans?

Neiman interviewed actors who were central in building what became the celebrated memory culture in Germany—historians, philosophers, directors of memorial educational centers, journalists, academics, and activists, among others. However, until the concluding chapter of the book, with a few blessed exceptions, there is little consideration of migrant voices, Jewish or not, which consider the problem of racism and discrimination in Germany after WWII and today. Neiman recognizes this shortcoming in asking how many racist structures still survive. In her review of the early days of the Bundesrepublik Jenny Wüstenberg claims, and Neiman agrees, that Adenauer’s politics built a democracy without a democratic culture: Nazis went back to life unpunished, and nobody spoke in the name of the victims.[1] This has changed, but now, as we see in debates about Antisemitism in Germany, there are dedicated “protectors of Jewish life” who protect Jews as potential victims, religious and othered in a way that both neglects the complexities and varieties of living as Jews in Germany and further excludes people of color, Muslims, and other minority groups from this very body politic.

Neiman claims that Jews can live in Germany today not in fear, however while suffering “softer insults.” I agree, and this is a tremendous achievement. We can, however, ask: when do the soft, everyday insults become cumulatively oppressive and for whom? When do they also translate into diminished opportunities? In what ways is this experience shared by other excluded groups?

Neiman reviews major debates about Holocaust memory in Germany in their milieu and political context. Following the discussion of Adorno and Horkheimer’s group experiments which proved the moral myopia in which shame in Germany of the 1950s had no moral component, she turns to the intellectual history of writing about perpetrators in Germany after the Holocaust. In discussing Bettina Stangneth’s Eichmann before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer (2011), she turns to “the Germans” and tells them and us—there is more to learn, and to do, morally, with this learning. Neiman shares her worries about the potential reception of the book in dialogue with Stangneth, who claims: “You don’t want to be embraced to death. And the Germans who will embrace you are people you don’t want at all. The sort that secretly want all this atonement to stop. They are not even particularly secret about it” (p. 57).

Neiman celebrates Germans’ shift of focus from the suffering Germans experienced to the suffering they created. This is indeed essential in moving beyond self-victimization. Competitive victimhood is universal, Neiman claims. This is true, and Michael Rothberg’s The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators is helpful in thinking how to overcome the dichotomy of victims and perpetrators toward that of responsibility.[2] Still, Neiman reminds the reader, both in the US and in Germany people want to believe that they are not racist, that they are past race (and quite a few of
those also that we are past the feminist revolution). Things are more complicated than that, and Neiman’s book helps us unpack those complexities in engaging and productive ways.

(2) Did the Germans learn from the Germans?

In chapter 3 (“Cold War Memories”) Neiman claims that East Germany did a better job in working off the past than West Germany. This is contrary to what is usually claimed, where the common knowledge is that the GDR narrative was that they were busy fighting fascism. Neiman lists the criteria by which “nations” can be judged to have successfully attempted to work through their past. First, the nation must have a coherent and widely accepted national narrative; this, I may add, is true in democracies as well as non-democratic regimes. Be that as it may, Neiman is right that both the Federal Republic and the US State Department were ambivalent about whether Nazis and the legacy of slavery were bad, respectively. Second, these national narratives must be reinforced by symbols; Neiman claims that there are no monuments for Nazis. It is true that one cannot find a public monument in contemporary Germany that celebrates Nazis as Nazis. There are, however, monuments for Wehrmacht soldiers all around West Germany, and for Nazi perpetrators listing their achievements without reference to their past, and many monuments that commemorate the dead of the First and Second World Wars together, with no notice of the differing regimes and empires those wars were fought by and under. Such monuments have been debated, sometimes and in some places, while in others, plaques and monuments that celebrate Nazi achievements stayed in place.

Neiman claims that the numbers of ex-Nazis left in office in the government police and universities is almost maddening, as “too many institutions didn’t want to know” (p. 107). However, we must ask the equally maddening question: what if they were actually proud? Worse, what if they continue on some deep level to be proud of those achievements, holding tight to the lacunas in memorialization which makes the pride legitimate? A lack of public interest cannot be the sole reason. We ought, with the help of Neiman’s work, to reconsider the conjunctures that make it possible to, at best, avoid the discussion of perpetrators still honored in Germany, or of how their honor frames and makes space for everyday racism and further atrocities.

The historians’ debate and discussion of the trivialization of the Nazi past continue today. Both the conservative and progressive parties blame each other for trivialization of the Holocaust. To think of this impasse productively, I can note that in comparison to the historian’s debate, which was dominated by white German men, in the Mbembe debate there are more voices included in thinking about Antisemitism, whereas still the vast majority of those voices are of men.

Neiman’s description of her experience as a visitor to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe ends with her reflection that “after weaving my body through the slabs a little longer I walked out into the day, discontent” (p. 90). In my ethnographic study of visitor’s reactions to the memorial, I found that it works differently for different publics—German visitors know they are supposed to be transformed morally through a literal wandering through the memorial.[3] They see and respond to the Nazi atrocities against the Jewish people, the Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, and persons with disabilities. However, what I called (in a later discussion on representation of Jews in Germany) “directed viewing” limits the subject positions of Jews, while it trains the German gaze on minorities and racism today in seeing them as past, present, and potentially future victims, figuring who may participate in memory work.[4] This sort of direction often mirrors the formation of groups that may
more easily land in an academic-track high school, rent a desirable apartment, and earn a university degree.

(3) How can “we” learn from each other?

The second part of the book deals with the legacy of racism in the American South. In chapter 4, “Everybody Knows about Mississippi,” Neiman helpfully decodes the chilling presence of loyalty to white supremacy and its iconography at the University of Mississippi (which is at the same time considered a hotbed for liberals). In the same chapter, there is a helpful discussion about integrated public education and how the state continues to undermine it. The same is true today in the Kreuzberg and Neukölln sections of Berlin, where the local press recognizes that schools remain segregated despite plans to “integrate” them, and the likelihood that a child whose parents were migrants, or poor, will attend a gymnasium and pursue higher education is slim.

Chapter 5, “Lost Causes,” engages powerfully with activists and academics as well as middle-of-the-road citizens, history teachers, and family members reenacting the Confederate side of the Civil War. After reading Neiman’s critical engagement with activists who in some way and to some extent identify with Confederate commemoration, I have missed the same consideration of research on right radicalism and the lack of commemoration of victims of right violence in Germany.

Seeing that the segregated South was, as Diane McWhorter claims (p. 201), a totalitarian society in which every aspect of life was organized around race is comparable to the recognition Germans came to that their parents and grandparents were part of a totalitarian society. Yet the consequences of this realization are different—in the South those who work against historical segregation fight discrimination today. In Germany, few of those working in Holocaust education also work for the inclusion of minorities in civic education projects and in society at large. Only with the attacks that came after the publication of the book, on Jews, on migrants (and daily on Romani, asylum seekers, and other groups) did the German press and political elite begin to address right radicalism and racism as a “poison” to the German society. With Neiman’s book, this should be further studied.

Neiman critically discusses emotional engagement with the past in both Germany and the US. People from the Mississippi Delta express their love for the place, and Neiman rightly and forcefully unpacks this love, its harshness as well as its history. She is careful to voice the skepticism of her German counterparts when she informs them that she is writing a book about Germany’s coming to terms with the past as a success story. Love and strangeness have been a topic in the German radio SWR2 We Love Israel, a winning podcast series (written and directed by Noam Brusilovsky and Ofer Waldman) about the relations of white Christian Germans to Jews and to Israel, and how Jewish Israelis feel both embraced and confined by it.[5] A comparison of those voices, the othered (if also sometimes revered) ones, to the experience of the American South, would reveal the stark differences, and the level on which social change has indeed taken place for minority groups in Germany since unification. The division between guilt and responsibility is important in the discussion of transformation from racist to democratic life. Neiman doubts that guilt can be entirely separated from responsibility. I agree. But what if responsibility ceases to activate political engagement in the present and instead remains backward-looking, working like guilt? In other words, what if the condition of US American activists in the Mississippi Delta, confessing that they were “of a mind that things were post racial” is shared with some memory entrepreneurs in Germany today, at a
time when coming to terms with the German past is attacked from the left as well as from the right?

Especially compelling is Neiman’s conversation with Bryan Stevenson, the African American civil rights lawyer who funded the Equal Justice Initiative, which has saved hundreds of prisoners from execution, and who created the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, also known as the National Lynching Memorial. Stevenson took Germany’s confrontation with its past as a model. According to him, what is missing in America is shame: there is a consensus that slavery was wrong, but even among families descending from slave owners it is hard to find shame, even if one can detect regret and even remorse. But, as contends literature and cultural studies professor Aleida Assmann, shame and negative feelings can take a society forward only to an extent. I agree, and as Assmann and Neiman recently argued in relation to the discussion of philosopher and historian Achille Mbembe, it also stiffens it in relation to discussing the past openly alongside other human rights violations, colonial legacies, and racism.[6]

Alongside the metaphor of redemption, Neiman also presents the metaphor of conversion: people of the town of Tallahatchie, Mississippi, eventually understood the need to have a plaque explaining the brutal murder of a fourteen-year-old black boy from Chicago, Emmett Till, by two local white men in 1955 who were acquitted at trial. Both later confessed to the murder in a magazine interview. Neiman interviewed family members of the murdered child, activists, and educators working in light of his murder as well as the son of the defense attorney who got them acquitted. These are rare and powerful materials that show that indeed, the son of a white supremacist holds views that are similar to those held by his racist father, as he claims in a self-contradictory manner that Till’s murder happened elsewhere, not in his town.

In a tour de force from an ethnographer working in and between her two “home” cultures, we learn from her honest comments how those encounters were often scary, revolting, or elating. In a particularly powerful statement that can be taught in history, sociology, and anthropology classes, Neiman claims that “you cannot hope to understand another culture until you try to get inside a piece of it and walk around there for a while. You know you’ll never get it in a way that someone who was born inside it does” (p. 255). This humility and curiosity to enter a culture cautiously not in order to glorify or condemn, not even in order to become one and the same, but to try to understand, is often missing in the German discussion of Nazi legacies, of Jews, and of other minorities. This book has already helped to open this discussion further.

Citing historian and commentator Jan Philipp Reemtsma, Neiman claims that concentration camp spaces cannot have the purpose of conversion. She then mentions the many programs that now direct Muslim migrants to these spaces, concluding that “no visit to a concentration camp ensures you will identify with the victims rather than with the perpetrators” (p. 280). We may, however, consider a different possibility: what happens if identification with the victims comes from the wrong group? Anthropologist Esra Özyürek shows how Muslim migrants are taught to believe that they are Antisemitic and, much like other descendants of perpetrators, should change.[7] When they present the “wrong” feeling, namely, that they feel that they could be victimized in the same way that Jews were by the National Socialists owing to their experience as migrants in Germany, this is deemed inappropriate, even dangerous. The issue is not about seeing the sacredness of the space, but rather, that that place of worship is open only to “Bio-Germans” and only to a limited extent to Jews and to Muslims who are willing to accept this exclusionary mechanism on which memory is borne.
In chapter 9, “In Place of Conclusions,” Neiman writes about the works of and conversations with many of the groups that were missing from the book hitherto—nativist AfD politicians and journalists trying to understand this phenomenon; Samuel Schidem, a philosophy student, pedagogue, and Druze migrant from Israel working on Antisemitism; and Dr. Naika Foruntan, director of the Center for Migration and Integration Studies. I wish that such discussions were not separate from the careful considerations of social change in Germany in the first part of the book. Neiman claims that we “can learn from one another but we cannot transfer principle without paying attention to difference” (p. 376). We need to learn from each other, continually, and pay attention to the groups and voices at work in defining what we talk about when we talk about racism, in light of the memory and presence of evil.

Irit Dekel is Assistant Professor of Germanic Studies and Jewish Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington.

Notes


[5]. See https://www.swr.de/swr2/hoerspiel/podcast-we-love-israel-100.html.


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