

[Tebbe on Olick, 'The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility'](#)

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Jeffrey K. Olick. *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility.* New York: Routledge, 2007. VIII, 229 S. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-95682-6; \$35.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-95683-3.

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Postmodern Figurations of Memory

Jeffrey K. Olick has written extensively on the subject of memory, and he has now combined his previously published essays into one volume. While the chapters cover a diverse array of topics, they coalesce around a critique of the Halbwachsian idea of collective memory--an interpretation of postwar Germany's memory culture, the concept of a "politics of regret," and an argument for the fundamental connection between memory and modernity. Olick's trenchant observations make *The Politics of Regret* worth reading for all who are interested in the study of collective memory and for those with specific interest in the memory culture of postwar Germany.

Courses on collective memory typically begin with a selection by Maurice Halbwachs, who is considered the father of memory studies. In total, Olick's book can be construed as one long argument against normative models of collective memory stemming from Halbwachs. Olick advocates for something he calls "social memory studies," which covers a "wide variety of mnemonic processes" (p. 34). The fifth chapter, entitled "Figurations of Memory," does the most effective job of laying out his vision. To combat the reification he claims is inherent in the notion of collective memory, Olick substitutes a "process-relational" model. This model stresses a changing process of "remembering" rather than a fixed, monolithic notion of "collective memory." To illuminate this process, Olick proposes the "counter-concepts" of field, medium, genre, and profile (p. 91).

Examining fields of memory allows scholars to look at collective memories in a non-unitary fashion. In considering the "media" of memory, he argues that scholars can avoid the trap of defining memories as things that are merely stored and retrieved, rather than the products of mediation. By classifying forms of memory into genres, scholars can discern the process of memory creation, rather than seeing it only as a fixed entity. Discerning how memory fits into political-cultural profiles is necessary for scholars to understand that memory is not made by politics, but that it actually shapes political meaning. All of these counter-concepts are thus intended as antidotes to the normative assumptions that Olick sees implicated in Halbwachs's concept of collective memory.

Olick applies his theoretical perspective to the particularly rich case of postwar Germany's struggles with the past. He divides up the history of postwar Germany's memory into five periods associated with "genres" of remembering that he locates through the prism of official commemorations of the date of German surrender, May 8, 1945. In the immediate postwar period, Germans utilized the

genre of victimhood, seeing themselves, not Jews, as the primary victims of the war. After this followed "liberation," beginning in the 1960s when such events as the Auschwitz trials forced Germans to confront the past, and then a time of "normalcy and normalization" when acknowledgement of the past became accepted (p. 62). Olick, then, sees a shift toward "normalization through relativization" in the 1980s when figures like Helmut Kohl stressed Germany's need to transcend its past and become a "normal" nation (p. 71). Being "normal" meant that Germans could take national pride in their past in the same way that other nations do.

Olick defines the fifth period of memory in united Germany as a continuation of the prior trend of normalization. He generally stresses the importance of Social Democratic leader Willy Brandt in Germany's reckoning with the past and the role of conservative Kohl in trying to normalize the past, reflecting the author's tendency to mark shifts based on political leadership. While this approach allows him to dissect the agendas of Germany's political leaders, it often misses the complexity and popular participation in memory of World War II and the Holocaust. For example, the television miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) did more to force a reckoning of the past in Germany than any politician's speech. Additionally, politically organized German expellees bolstered the narrative of German victimhood used by public figures.

It is not until the second half of book that Olick delves into the title concept, the "politics of regret." Here, he tries to explain the recent worldwide political focus on atonement and apology. He considers the politics of regret to be the natural outgrowth of the "consciousness of progressive temporality" embedded in modernity itself, rather than a consequence of identity politics or renewed commitments to universal human rights (p. 122). By "consciousness of progressive temporality," he refers to the modern way of viewing historical time as a series of events moving onward into the future, as opposed to theological conceptions of time that mark a clear beginning and end. According to Olick, modern conceptions of good and evil in the universe eschew theodicy in favor of resentment, and thus call for human society to render restitution to victims of past traumas.

In the last chapter, he takes this framework even further to create a better understanding of our contemporary "memory crisis" (p. 175). Crucial to this understanding is his assertion that memory cultures do not merely reflect their historical epochs but are "fundamental features of existence within them" (p. 176). To illustrate his point, he contrasts the memory crises of the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. The former was defined by nation-states that sought a unity between memory and the nation. Like Pierre Nora, he points to a break between collective memory and the nation in the late twentieth century; unlike him, Olick does not perceive a simultaneous rise in the legitimated practice of "history." Instead, he identifies the continuation of what he calls "chronic differentiation": a fracturing of unitary society into scattered elements with attendant temporalities (p. 188). The multiplicity of pasts and memories is thus a key attribute to the current postmodern condition and its shortage of meta-narratives. In his ability to link modernity and postmodernity to modes of remembrance, Olick certainly makes a compelling and provocative case for the salience of memory and its study.

Although *The Politics of Regret* provides a much needed reexamination of Halbwachs's arguments and the entire concept of collective memory, it is not entirely convincing in its observations on postwar Germany. Developments in East Germany and in post-1989 Germany are almost completely absent, despite a long-standing scholarly examination of these topics by Jeffrey Herf, Mary Fulbrook,

and others. This is rather ironic, considering the author's denunciation of collective memory's normative constraints. Furthermore, Olick only looks at developments at the high political level, leaving aside vernacular memory almost completely.

Like Nora, Reinhart Koselleck, and others, he also is too quick to draw a dichotomy between modernity and theological ways of seeing time and the universe. If recent political events around the world and in the United States have taught us anything, it is that religion has retained its power and is intertwined with modernity, rather than opposed to it. Furthermore, recent events in the Balkans as well as the rise of nativist movements in the United States ought to make us question whether pronouncements of the nation-state's demise have been premature, or at least ought to be more nuanced.

That being said, *The Politics of Regret* offers stimulating and thought-provoking reading for those who are invested in the study of collective memory, as well a compelling case for a process-relational understanding of memory and a strong defense of the field's relevance.

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