

E Pluribus Unum? Memory Conflicts, Democracy, and Integration

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CONFERENCE REPORT

BY MARY JANE REIN

Placing Nazi Germany and memories of the Holocaust into a comparative framework with memories of slavery and violence against American Indians, crimes at the heart of America's founding, is an ambitious project. The Strassler Center tackled this formidable challenge in a three day conference, *E Pluribus Unum? Memory Conflicts, Democracy, and Integration*, that asked whether it is possible for the United States to deal constructively with its racist and even genocidal past, as post-Nazi Germany has largely done regarding the Holocaust. Collective memory can be a tool for building national identity and promoting integration but it can also serve the opposite end. Given the recent intensification of harmful rhetoric and violence based on ideas of white supremacy in the US and elsewhere around the globe, it is clear that we have not come to terms with the legacies of mass violence and racism. In fact, nostalgia for the past has fueled memory conflicts and threatened democratic values.

Conference participants explored these issues through the perspectives of history, psychology, sociology, critical media studies, literary analysis, museum studies, and memorial design. While the papers did not reach consensus about how collective memories could advance inclusion and stabilize democracy, the presenters acknowledged generative threads that might shape future research and modes for thinking about conflicted history. Yet, these productive avenues also appeared in tension with a certain ambivalence about whether reckoning with the dark past could sufficiently impact present day politics and public discourse. Rather, remembering past conflicts might actually result in glorifying symbols that produce more violence.

Historian IAN BURUMA (Bard College) opened the conference with the keynote address, *Bad Memories*, which examined the negative effects of recalling only victimhood or triumph. Painting history in broad strokes, he considered how memories of historical events shape collective identity. Some nations glorify heroic resistance against tyranny, as in the Dutch struggle against Spanish tyranny often conflated with the Dutch resistance to Nazi occupation.

Other nations celebrate national martyrdom that fosters a desire for revenge, such as the 14th century Battle of Kosovo that led to Serbian atrocities in the Balkan Wars. Moving to memories of World War II in Germany and Japan, Buruma argued that we need to face historical truths in order to understand contemporary politics but, he cautioned, we also need to depoliticize history. In his view, when suffering becomes the core of identity, it can function like a religious sensibility that resists honest examination. Historians should avoid writing history from the perspective of a particular culture in order to escape the noxious bias of nationalism. To that end, foreign historians have played a crucial role in debunking heroic narratives with appropriate skepticism. According to Buruma, legitimate remembrance of suffering needs to be distinguished from dangerous remembering rooted in a sense of collective victimhood, which can be a powerful source of political mobilization. Questions from the audience challenged these ideas and they provoked robust discussion throughout the conference.

Academic organizer THOMAS KÜHNE (Clark University) framed the themes animating the conference panels in introductory remarks. Citing Lincoln's first inaugural address that appealed to the "mystic chords of memory" to avert the Civil War, Kühne examined memory politics in terms of national identity. Following the Civil War, competing ideas about the conflict gave way to a rigid hegemonic structure that fostered white supremacy at the expense of mechanisms to establish peace and justice. A century later, the rise of the Civil Rights movement introduced counter narratives about the Civil War which challenged a single collective memory that had effectively whitewashed history. In response, and with the rise of the conservative movement in the 80s and 90s and the legacy of the Vietnam War, a renewed fascination with Civil War symbols took hold and these symbols, including the rebel flag and confederate monuments, continue to polarize American society. By contrast, after World War II, Germans confronted the trauma of Nazism, took responsibility for the crimes committed, and accepted certain consequences. Despite some continuities with the Nazi past, a negative memory culture emerged that entailed a deliberate break. Driven by shame and a desire to return to the community of nations, Germany embraced pacifism and rejected rather than heroized its recent history. Today, Germany's negative memory culture often serves as model for a common European or even universal approach to Holocaust memory, a welcome development, as Kühne critically noticed.

The same nation that caused the destruction of the European continent now imposed its ‘negative nationalism’ upon the rest of that continent and even beyond.

Panel I, *Collective Identity and Memory Politics in the United States*, began with JOHN BODNAR (Indiana University) who defined patriotism in response to America’s War on Terror. War-based patriotism, rooted in an authoritarian view of an all good, all powerful nation, focuses on anger and hate. Bodnar described how this form of patriotism rekindled nativism and led to racist violence following 9/11. Empathic patriots, on the other hand, are able to offer critical views of state sponsored violence. These divergent expressions of patriotism challenge efforts to construct a uniform national identity and frame ideas about what it means to be a devoted citizen in a time of conflict. PHIA SALTER (Texas A&M University) kept the focus on the US context with a discussion of Black History representations based in critical race psychology. She examined how schools use Black History Month to respond to racist concepts and to affirm black youth through stories that highlight black accomplishment. Yet, she cautioned against celebrating individual success at the expense of recognizing the structures of injustice that remain intact. Citing an ethnographic study she conducted in a highly segregated Kansas City school, she described interviews with students and teachers that measured their responses to representations of black history. She concluded that broad support for racial justice can only succeed when it aligns with white America.

IRENE KACANDES (Dartmouth College) returned the discussion to victimhood on the second panel *German Memories, American Memories*. Victim status, she explained, secures sympathy in a victim saturated world but also provokes counterclaims of victimization. Drawing on personal observations about such historical reversals and informed by her scholarship on trauma and memory, she questioned who is allowed to be a victim. Her examples of turnarounds in victimization include Germans who became targets of the Allied Air War, Europeans who consider themselves victims of the current refugee crisis, and white males who believe they are penalized by diversity politics in the US. Kacandes introduced the concept of “co-witnessing,” which allows real victims to keep their identity but gives space for allies. Continuing the comparative framework, JEFFREY HERF (University of Maryland) proposed two ways of thinking about memories of a difficult past by contrasting the US after the Civil War and

Germany following the Holocaust. Referencing the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, he posited that, throughout history, the key to reconciling conflict has been to simply forget. Following the Civil War, the US obeyed western norms by withdrawing the Federal Army from the south and ignoring the development of the Ku Klux Klan. In contrast, the total defeat of Germany allowed the allies to bring many Nazis to trial at Nuremberg. After that, no politician in West Germany could overlook the enormity of the Holocaust. This reckoning with the past extended to German sympathy and support for the new state of Israel

DIRK MOSES (University of Sydney) examined the supposed threat of “white genocide” as it has recently emerged among the far right in Europe and former settler colonial nations including the US, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Drawing on white genocide propaganda posted on the internet, he described the inversion of reality that mobilizes white rage. He considered the ideology of diversity that is seen as genocidal and the pithy statements that capture the response of the white power movement such as “we have the right to preserve our ethnocultural identity.” Globalization, deindustrialization, ethnic competition, and diversity politics fuel these far right anxieties about maintaining a white demographic majority.

JENNIFER EVANS (Carleton University) also focused on social media and the power of online conversations to serve as repositories of cultural memory. She described technology’s “black box effect,” which obscures how it works. And she demonstrated how historians might harness the digital footprint and the rich demographic data that users willingly provide for the purpose of archival research. The content users post in the digital sphere offers a window into how past traumas shape the present. Her social media analysis further showed how memories of mass violence can be weaponized. Yet, while highlighting the ethical challenges to monitoring user data, she cautioned that the more we clamp down, the harder it will be to access valuable information.

Victim consciousness was central, once again, to the presentation by JOHANNA VOLLHARDT (Clark University) on the panel *Trauma, Identity, and Reconciliation*. Her research examines the genuine psychological motivations underlying collective identities which shape different construals of the same past events. Vollhardt identified five dimensions that prompt disagreement: who is the victim; who is responsible; what was the perpetrator’s intent; how

severe was the harm; and when did the violence occur. In addition, she showed how responses to past events play out differently between high power perpetrator groups who seek to avoid responsibility and low power victim groups who seek acknowledgement. The former group is also less willing to recognize harms, while the latter tends toward pro-social behavior in supporting other victim groups. RON EYERMAN (Yale University) kept the focus on group formation in his presentation on the making of white American identity. Drawing on social theories of trauma and his research on social movements, he described some of the mechanisms behind the white supremacy revival. Public symbols from the traumatic past, such as the Lee statue in Charlottesville, serve as sites of public memory that embody deeply felt emotions and become resources for mass mobilization. Possible removal of the statue provoked a massive alt right protest, which became a performative act that impacted three audiences: strengthening the original protest group, inciting a counter group of opponents, and serving as tool to recruit the wider public to the movement.

OUSMANE POWER-GREENE (Clark University) also focused on social and political movements in his discussion of reparations for victims of the Red Summer of 1919. He described a racial pogrom against the African American community in East St. Louis, Illinois that resulted in more than 500 deaths that shocked the nation. President Wilson resisted calls for a federal investigation that might bring the leaders of the massacre to justice. Violence perpetrated against black citizens and their communities unfolded across the nation. The movement to secure financial reparations has historically focused on slavery but Power-Greene advocated for compensation to repair the intergenerational consequences of the devastating race riots of 1919 and to redress the material conditions of black people living in those cities today. PAULINE WAKEHAM (Western University) also addressed the imperative to reckon with the traumatic past as well as the limits of framing certain injustices as solely past matters but with a focus on the Indian Residential School System in Canada. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada concluded its inquiry into the century long practice of forcible separation and aggressive assimilation of children from Indigenous families. A key mechanism of transitional justice, the TRC process is meant to transition nations to liberal democracy following violent conflict once an unjust system ends. Yet, in Canada, the structural injustice of white settler colonialism persists on land expropriated from Indigenous Nations. Moreover, the

politics of post-truth North America coincide with settler denialism in ways that seek to re-orient the process of reckoning with these difficult truths towards the recuperation Canada's image as a tolerant multicultural democracy.

Another form of repair informed panel IV, *Museums, Memorials, and National Imagination*.

PAUL CHAAT SMITH (National Museum of the American Indian, NMAI), a member of the Comanche tribe, began with the idea that Americans are surrounded by Native imagery that shapes the consciousness in profound ways. He assured the audience that it is acceptable to love these imaginary Indians given that genuine Indians are mostly invisible to the American public, which rarely thinks about them. In creating an exhibition at NMAI, he considered how to leverage nostalgia to create an emotional connection. While activists and many in the academy reject this approach as hate speech, Smith wished to address the crime at the heart of the American project with levity. This does not excuse the brutal truth that the US exists because of the massive displacement of Indian nations. ROBYN AUTRY (Wesleyan University) interrogated museums as sites for making collective sense of the nation and its painful past. In her work on the politics of museum development, she examines how US history museums represent racial violence, and especially the treatment of slavery and the black American experience, as part of a unifying national narrative. Black history museums tell the collective story of a people that includes depictions of their victimization. As such, these museums are sites of memory but they are also institutions that must sustain themselves and so they cast difficult history into neat narratives. In contrast, artists who refuse collective memory, recast traumatic events in their work and complicate the idea of a uniform version of the past.

MARITA STURKEN (NYU) shifted the conversation from museums to memorials (with museums) that commemorate victims of terrorism, focusing on the National September 11 Memorial in New York City and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. Despite their radically different origins, both memorials emerged in the early 21st century and employ a vocabulary of modernism to deploy memory strategically to tell stories about America. One uses memory to affirm the nation, the other demonstrates that terrorism was at the heart of the nation's story despite the myth of American exceptionalism. But they both draw on minimalism, which is devoid of emotion and artistic expression, in service to

commemoration and mourning. ALISON LANDSBERG (George Mason University) continued discussion of the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice already nationally acclaimed since its spring 2018 opening. While historians have written powerful accounts of slavery, terror lynchings, the Jim Crow era, segregation, and mass incarceration, they have not been effective in changing the national narrative or in advancing social justice around race. Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative which founded the Montgomery memorial, recognized that this failure of national memory has abetted the crisis of mass incarceration. Unlike other nations that have endured inhumanity and cruelty on a massive scale, the US has been disinclined to confront its violent past through public memorials and memorial museums. Drawing a distinction between memory and history, Landsberg argued that as long as slavery, lynching, and other forms of state sponsored violence remain in the realm of history, rather than memory where it can exert its force on the present, it cannot be mobilized to advance political change.

In the concluding presentation, JAMES YOUNG (University of Massachusetts) reflected on whether the negative forms of the 9/11 memorial qualify it as another Holocaust monument. He meditated on loss, absence, and regeneration as themes that have informed memorialization in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Highlighting Maya Lin's Vietnam Veteran's memorial as a paradigmatic example of the counter memorial, Young described how she employed minimalism to formalize loss by carving the memorial into the landscape. In a design indebted to WW I and II memorials, Lin opened a wound in the earth to create a space for memory that rejects the idea of repair. Her black horizontal design gives expression to unresolved emotions about the war which contrast with conventional monuments built in soaring white marble. Subsequent Holocaust monuments follow Lin's abstract approach to counter memorialization. Germany's fraught process for selecting a memorial design asked how to remember and reunite the nation on the bedrock of a national crime. In the end, the Berlin Denkmal's waving field of stelae lacks historical logic. Its abstract design could remember anything but the museum, located below, anchors the memorial in the specific history of the Holocaust. This interplay between museum and minimalist architecture became the model for the 9/11 memorial, with its monumental footprints articulating absence.

E Pluribus Unum called on participants to consider whether remembering state sponsored violence contributes toward unifying national identity or whether it deepens divisions. In examining the complicated tension between memory and history, the conference participants debated important themes related to the traumatic past including victimhood, identity formation, national shame, truth and reconciliation, collective memory, individual trauma, repair, memorialization, and national narratives. Massive crimes, if confined to the category of history, are resistant to change in the present. In contrast, a vibrant memory culture calls on citizens to challenge consensus narratives, to question structural injustice, to intervene in present-day genocides. Monuments and museums to past violence are not substitutes for action. That is the lesson of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, a tour de force in memory, which asks visitors to “co-witness” historical violence and to render the past alive. Redemption is possible if memory is put in service to history with the aim of advancing justice in the present.

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

KEYNOTE

Ian Buruma, Bard College:

Bad Memories

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Thomas Kühne, Clark University:

Memory Conflicts and National Identity: Germany and the United States

PANEL I – COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND MEMORY POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES

John Bodnar, Indiana University:

Patriotism, Memory, and America's War on Terrorism

Phia S. Salter, Texas A & M University:

The Dynamic Psychological Resonance between Black History Representations and Sociocultural Change

PANEL II -- GERMAN MEMORIES, AMERICAN MEMORIES

Irene Kacandes, Dartmouth College:

Victim Talk: Comparative Reflections by a US American Who Works on Germany

Jeffrey Herf, University of Maryland:

Remembering the Holocaust, Attacking Israel, Defending Israel: Memory and Politics in West Germany, East Germany, and Unified Germany

Dirk Moses, University of Sydney:

The Fear of "White Genocide" in the US, Germany, and Australia

Jennifer V. Evans, Carleton University:

Facebook and the Use and Abuse of History in the Digital Public Sphere

PANEL III – TRAUMA, IDENTITY, AND RECONCILIATION

Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Clark University:

Psychological Processes Contributing to Collective Memory Conflicts in the Aftermath of Collective Violence

Ron Eyerman, Yale University:

The Weight of the Past in the White Supremacy Revival, The Making of White American Identity

Ousmane Power-Greene, Clark University:

“Beyond Recognition, Toward Redress.” The State of Truth and Reconciliation Committees 100 years after the Red Summer of 1919: A Critique

Pauline Wakeham, Western University:

Truth and Reconciliation in a Post-Truth Age: Confronting Settler Amnesia in Contemporary Canada

PANEL IV – MUSEUMS, MEMORIALS AND NATIONAL IMAGINATION

Paul Chaat Smith, National Museum of the American Indian:

The Redsonian: Negotiating the Politics of Memory at the Smithsonian’s American Indian Museum

Robyn Autry, Wesleyan University:

The Museumification of Memory: Unsettling (Black) History at the Museum

Marita Sturken, New York University:

Designing the Memory of Terror, Negotiating National Memory: The 9/11 Memorial and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice

Alison Landsberg, George Mason University:

Post-Postracial America: Confronting the Afterlife of Slavery at the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama

SPECIAL PRESENTATION

James E. Young, University of Massachusetts, Amherst:

The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between

CONCLUDING ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

John Bodnar, Irene Kacandes, Phia S. Salter:

Introductory Remarks