

Prescribed Anti-Racism? Historic and Contemporary Challenges to a Global Memory Imperative

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Abstract:

This excellent book on Holocaust Memory and Racism challenges the widespread assumption that learning about the Holocaust automatically makes us better people. In fifteen contributions, the authors assembled in this volume look at various national case studies that demonstrate how, from the early post-war period up until today, it has been all too common to strongly oppose Nazism and its racist policies but at the same time keep racism as an unquestioned organizing principle of one's own society. To approach the universalization of the Holocaust that turned it into the ultimate "symbol of racism and injustice" (p.5) the publication focusses on societies that have not directly been affected by Nazism. Thereby the different chapters discuss issues of prevailing racism as well as anti-racist engagements and take into consideration the value of empathetic connections between victims of the Nazis and victims of Colonialism. A highly recommended read.

How to cite:

Antweiler, Katrin: „Prescribed Anti-Racism? Historic and Contemporary Challenges to a Global Memory Imperative [Review of: Gilber, Shirli and Avril Alba: Holocaust Memory and Racism in the Postwar World. Wayne State University Press, 2019.]”. In: KULT_online 61 (2020).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2020.1043>



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Gilber, Shirli and Avril Alba. *Holocaust Memory and Racism in the Postwar World*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019. 470 pages, 39.99 GBP. ISBN 978-0-8143-4269-5.

This edited volume brings together contributions by renowned academics who offer insightful and thoroughly researched case studies on the intertwinements of Holocaust memory and various concerns regarding racism and anti-racism. The overall aim as formulated by the editors Shirli Gilbert and Avril Alba is to challenge the assumption “that there is an unproblematic connection between Holocaust memory and the discourse of anti-racism” (p. 1). This is an endeavor overdue and all the more welcome, given the many uncritical connections that are being drawn between the two fields. Because, as the editors state in their introduction, it has become “commonplace [...] that Holocaust education and commemoration will expose the dangers of prejudice and promote peaceful coexistence” (p. 1). In order to show that these links are indeed not as self-evident as they are often presented to be, the fifteen chapters foremost historicize the assumed lessons taken from the Holocaust.

In the first section of four, “Responses to Racism after World War II”, four chapters trace early engagements with Holocaust history and memory from England and the United States to South Africa and Australia. These contributions convincingly demonstrate that despite a growing awareness about the tremendous consequences of Nazi racism, other forms of racism and antisemitism persisted across the world. All chapters in this part complement each other astonishingly well as they attest to this remarkable contradiction. Most compelling is Dan J. Puckett’s article “The Jim Crow of All Ages”, which paints a nuanced picture of the US-American society of the 1930s and '40s. He unpacks the paradox of a country which took pride in its fight for freedom and anti-discrimination abroad whilst at the same time, within its own society, tolerated and even supported segregationist policies and other gross expressions of anti-black racism such as lynching (p. 52). The novelty of Puckett’s text is the unambiguous assessment that it was (and still is) far easier to resent the Nazis and their murderous racism from afar, or

nowadays in retrospective, whilst still remaining indifferent or even in favor of racism close by. Some of the authors speak in this regard about a 'cognitive dissonance.' Suzanne D. Rutland in her study on "Conflicting Images in the Australian Media" finds such dissonance especially "between acknowledging the extent of Jewish suffering, on the one hand, and the opposition to Jewish survivor immigration, on the other" (p. 99).

Related to this topic, the second part of the volume looks at different Jewish responses to racism. In her chapter, Marjorie N. Feld traces the shifts in time and argumentation as they relate to evoking "the lessons of the Holocaust." She shows how American Jewry referred to the experiences of the Holocaust to either argue for engagement against the racist apartheid regime in South Africa – including criticism of South African Jews who might be benefitting from the system – or precisely against such activism. The contra-argument, openly positioning against racism, was drawn from the Holocaust as much as the one for it, because as both Feld and Michel E. Staub in his chapter demonstrate, the more conservative Jews in the US emphasized the need for 'Jewish unity' and thus advocated for focusing on the Jewish community and its security instead of engaging in the struggles of other minorities (p. 171). In regards to Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s, Staub contrasts anti-racist activists such as the Rabbi Joachim Prinz with other Jewish leaders who argued "that the fact of the Holocaust meant that Jews should withdraw immediately from their involvement in civil rights activism" (p. 206). Both cases – anti-apartheid and civil rights activism – illustrate the recurrent "clashes over the meanings of 'never again' [...]" (p. 175) and thus caution us to refer to this imperative all too thoughtlessly.

Part III of the volume speaks to the divide between Jewish and Holocaust Studies on the one hand and Postcolonial Studies on the other. It is an attempt to bring both disciplines together and demonstrate how this academic division "obscured" the "global circulation of memories" that frequently brings together memories of the Holocaust with those of Colonialism (p. 242). The authors of chapters nine and ten, Michael Rothberg and Sarah Phillips Casteel, through their works on literary narratives that tackle both the Holocaust and Colonialism come to a similar conclusion: That is, that memory of the Holocaust is not always evoked in a competitive manner. Instead, shared experiences of being racialized challenge the widespread assumption that "non-Western nations cannot 'remember' the Holocaust" (p. 260). To emphasize these empathetic connections seems especially noteworthy to me. Because, e.g. in Germany it is still

rather infamous to draw any parallels to the Holocaust since so far, they have mostly been understood as questioning its singularity.

Part IV of the book looks at more current international trends on Holocaust memory and education, finding that systemic racism often prevails despite the awareness for or even emphasis on lessons from the Holocaust. Shirli Gilbert searches South African textbooks for representations of Nazism and Racism and explains why, in the post-1994 era, despite calls for decolonization, the Holocaust had been integrated once again into the new curriculum. In this regard she states that “[t]he decision in the 1990s to include the Holocaust [...] was closely linked to the post-apartheid agenda of promoting democracy and non-racialism” (p. 364). This observation is interesting and would have benefitted from a further discussion, both of the very problematic concept of non-racialism (specifically in South Africa) as well as the formation of a neoliberal state after the official end of apartheid. This could have added to the important insight that this book provides – that is, the many flaws of a paradigm that assumes an intrinsic connection between Holocaust memory and an advocacy for (neo)liberal democracy.

Overall, the book's main achievement is its challenge of a powerful discourse that links Holocaust memory with moral superiority. In contemporary Germany, we find it creating new exclusions, as it establishes a hierarchy between Germans who are educated in Holocaust history and refugees, who are supposedly more prejudiced because they lack this very education. However, as the volume's editors state in their conclusion: “[...] there has been little concrete evidence to suggest that remembering and learning about the Holocaust imparts the kind of lessons that politicians or educators might hope” (p. 419). Furthermore, in response to current memory politics that suggest otherwise, I would like to add that one can be an anti-racist without any knowledge about the Holocaust whatsoever. These and other valuable results as well as many fruitful follow-up questions can be taken from reading this excellent publication.

Mit Holocaust Erinnerung Rassismus bekämpfen? Voreilige Kausalitäten hinterfragt

German Abstract:

Mit diesem Buch wird ein wertvoller Beitrag zur Diskussion über den nach dem Holocaust formulierten Erinnerungsimperativ ‚Nie Wieder‘ geleistet, indem dieser nicht nur historisiert, sondern auch in verschiedenen nationalen Kontexten eingebettet wird. So lässt sich zeigen, dass die Lehren aus dem Holocaust zum einen bei weitem nicht so universell, weil wechselnd, und zum anderen nicht so offensichtlich und selbsterklärend sind, wie oft angenommen. Letzteres wird von verschiedene Autor_innen daran gezeigt, dass sie die Diskrepanz zwischen Ablehnung der Nazis bei Gleichzeitiger Ignoranz oder gar Befürwortung gegenüber Rassismen in der eigenen Gesellschaft nachzeichnen, wie es etwa in den USA, Südafrika oder Australien der Fall war und ist. Der empfehlenswerte Sammelband stellt mutige Fragen und bringt wichtige Erkenntnisse für alle, die sich mit Holocaust Erinnerung im Kontext von Demokratieerziehung und Antirassismus befassen, ist aber auch darüber hinaus eine lohnende Lektüre.