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MEMORY'S FUTURE

A. Dirk Moses

Memory and the Future: Transnational Politics, Ethics and Society edited by Yifat Gutman, Adam D. Brown, and Amy Sodaro. Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Pp. 232. £50.

This important collection, the fourth volume in Andrew Hoskins and John Sutton's Memory Studies series for Palgrave, reminds the field that the future is as important as the past and the present. Because its guiding spirits are young sociologists who—rightly—are most interested in praxis, there is less philosophical reflection about temporality than one might have expected. This is hardly a drawback, however, as ultimately the reader wants empirically based and vividly conveyed case studies that bear out the central points made by the editors in their lucid introduction. As the subtitle indicates, these points emerge from a shared concern with transnationality, multidisciplinary, and temporality.

In the main, the chapters gesture to these themes in their own way. Each contribution is well selected and pitched. For example, Daniel Levy's chapter, which positions the Holocaust as the icon of "cosmopolitan memory," is subject to a withering critique by Ross Poole. In his chapter, "Misremembering the Holocaust," Poole comments acerbically that the assertion that the new critical memory of 1948 in Israel replaces "the old, ethnically determined idea of what it means to be an Israeli" is "political nonsense" (48)—thereby dashing his chances of an honorary degree from an American university. Coupling these chapters means the

reader is not left with the sound of one hand clapping.

The signature chapter—the one that explicitly operationalizes the editors' program—is written by one of them, Amy Sodaro, and Louis Bickford, a founding member of the International Center for Transitional Justice. With ample experience in the field of atrocity and its remembrance, Bickford and Sodaro conduct an expert analysis of the global boom of memorials at sites of genocide and torture. In an admirably sober investigation, they ask what kind of knowledge is transmitted to nonexpert visitors when they experience these sites and museums in Cambodia, Africa, and South America: Does the inevitable empathy with the victims translate into a differentiated understanding of the conditions and circumstances that led to the terrible violence? Not really, they conclude. The call for “never again” can have an almost platitudinous ring. The better future—which these memorials are designed to secure—is perhaps not guaranteed by this sort of memory, after all. By contrast, Kimberly Spring's chapter on the “public atrocity witnessing” of U.S. servicemen and servicewomen in Iraq who publicized photographs of their comrades' misdeeds ends on a more hopeful note. She shows how these ethical soldiers' activism binds them and the viewing public into a present and future in which their better ideals supersede the

degradation captured in the “trophy” photographs.

The book's multidisciplinary imperative means that garden-variety historians like myself are confronted with the work of cognitive psychologists, colleagues one would otherwise meet as a client on the consultation room couch or as a specimen in the laboratory. Jonathan Koppel and William Hirst's chapter on “The Role of Conversations in Shaping Individual and Collective Memory, Attitudes and Behavior” reveals the value of this exposure, for they provide an invaluable toolbox to explain how and why individual and collective memories are generated by the processes of “social contagion” and “induced forgetting,” the socially conditioned processes of remembering and forgetting experiences and information. While the authors concede that their experiments have been limited to small groups, they are rightly confident that their conclusions about memory's social mediation can be extended to large groups, thereby helping historians account for cultural memory in a methodologically satisfactory way.

Unfortunately, there can be no forgetting for the victims of rape and “ethnic cleansing,” as Selma Leydesdorff explains in her moving contribution about the Bosnian women she interviewed about their experiences in the civil war and as witnesses at the International Criminal Tribunal at the

Hague. Distressingly, the tribunal's protocols do not allow for a victim's testimony to be heard on its own terms; understandably, the judges must direct her to recall, if she can, specific details about a perpetrator or event, rather than recount *her* inescapable reality, the terror of imminent rape or other forms of torture, the loss of her husband and sons. A lamentation, this chapter is an act of solidarity with the victims, asking where their voices will be heard in the future if all that remains as an authoritative account are the perpetrator-focused transcripts of the trials.

Without doubt, the most elegant and lively chapter is Lindsey Freeman's analysis of the nuclear facility town of Oak Ridge in Tennessee. This is socioethnography at its best; the reader is carried along by the verve of the writing, which interlaces colorful description and cool analysis in a mixture of hard-headed realism and irony that is all too rare in North American academic prose. Freeman has carefully chosen photographs from the facility to illustrate her points about the cult of nostalgia that has developed there to arrest the town's decline from its halcyon days of high modernism in the 1950s. Here, the projected future in which everyone thought they were living has become an object of loss receding into the past, a memory screening out the murderous consequences

of the place's purpose—to develop the bombs dropped on Japan in 1945—and thereby foreclosing the nonnationalist and nontechnocratic future that a critical historical treatment would have afforded. The chapter is a mini-tour de force.

This book also features a valuable autobiographical essay by Ann Snitow on the *Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation* (1998), and two chapters in a section on revenge about contemporary violence in El Salvador and the Yasukuni Shrine in Japan. It is bookended by an afterword from Jeffrey K. Olick, "Professor Memory," who mounts a spirited defense of the book's premises, pointing out that the supposedly progressive critique of memory studies as symptomatic of post-utopian nostalgia and political regression is an unsustainable caricature. In fact, the field is best placed to interrogate the temporal reconfigurations of post-modernity because it is alive to the contingencies of all grand projects and its bearers, culturally situated individuals. Having freed themselves from a single future, perhaps, they are better placed to make it as they want.

A. Dirk Moses is Professor of Global and Colonial History at the European University Institute in Florence. He is the author of German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and has written on genocide in colonial contexts. He is finishing a book called "Genocide and the Terror of History."