MEMORY GOES ON: PAST, LEGITIMACY AND IDENTITY IN THE MAKING

Jeffrey K. Olick *The Sins of the Fathers, Germany, Memory, Method* (Chicago, IL, The University of Chicago Press, 2016)

Considering his empirical and theoretical work, Jeffrey K. Olick has long been a key contributor to the interdisciplinary academic field known as (collective) memory studies—and *The Sins of the Fathers: Germany, Memory, Method* constitutes a comprehensive addition to this project, one which in many ways builds on and combines Olick's previous publications. As such, the book pursues a double agenda: on the one hand, it is a detailed study of the evolution of German collective memory since World War II, more precisely of collective memory in the Federal Republic of Germany between 1949 and 1989. That is, Olick reconstructs the way in which official representations of the war and the Holocaust have been negotiated. By illuminating the German case, Olick aims to tackle issues to do with memory, identity and legitimacy—or better, the struggle to create orientation and legitimacy in the face of a difficult, non-heroic and not easily affirmable, past—and thus wider issues to do with "the politics of regret".[1] On the other hand, and framing this empirical task, Olick makes a theoretical proposal concerning how to think and study collective memory in our age. Here, he follows a Bakhtinian approach, one that builds around the concept of "dialogism". As such, Olick's latest book is ambitious, providing both an empirical project attentive to "actual words" [28], to *how* the past is actually made meaningful in particular contexts, and a theoretical project which adds to the field's conceptual apparatus.

Olick's investigation is based on official statements and speeches by key politicians. Analysing this corpus, he argues that particular statements and speeches are always part of a wider chain; they are texts produced at a particular moment in time and therefore influenced, amongst other things, by previous texts. Consequently, they also influence texts and governmental agendas which come after them. It is in this context that the concept of dialogue is central. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin, Olick views memory not as static, but as

[1] Jeffrey K. Olick, 2007, *The Politics of Regret. On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York, Routledge).

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continuously interacting with past, present and future—and, accordingly, memory is viewed as path-dependent, but not determined [60]. Connecting this to the wider argument about culture as structure, he calls for leaving the latter behind and viewing "whatever patterns of types that emerge as just that: emergent" [433]. In other words, Olick argues for a sociology which focuses on the temporal. Indeed, Olick insists, collective memory is something we do, not something we have [45]; and to grasp this, he proposes two aspects of dialogue: "profile" and "genre". The former, in the form of three legitimation profiles, "describe the unique contours—more and less smooth—of political meaning-making" [62]. Genres, in turn, concern the organisation of commemorative tropes over time; they "are a form of cultural memory, carriers of ways of seeing and the traces of all previous utterances of a particular sort" [68]. Amongst others, Olick identifies "Victimhood" and "German traditions" as genres with the tasks of exculpating and providing (prideful) identity respectively [71].

While both concepts are present in Olick's analysis, it is profile which runs central as the legitimation profiles underpin the main parts of the book, by dividing the period between 1949 and 1989 into three epochs: "the reliable nation", "the moral nation" and "the normal nation". Before Olick turns to them, he, however, offers a brief prologue based on his previous work.[2] This move is in line with his theoretical argument and indicates key themes between 1918 and 1949, e.g. the "Morgenthau plan" and the debate over collective guilt, which serve as a background for statements and speeches emerging in the Federal Republic. These texts, and this is Olick's overarching empirical claim, revolve largely around the denial of collective guilt.

Part 2 (chapters 4 to 8) of *The Sins of the Fathers* deals with the first legitimation profile and, as such, covers the construction of West Germany as a reliable nation, a profile dominating between 1949 and the mid/late 1960s. Through discussing speeches and statements, and in line with existing scholarship, Olick reconstructs how Nazism was framed as an aberration from what is "truly German". Here, the story goes, a gang seduced "the people", with Hitler being the evil *other*. Such a memory of the past is defensive and exculpatory—and opens space for Germany to return to Europe. The lesson to be learnt when telling such a story is that "we" must, and can, become a reliable nation, a partner, again.

[2] Jeffrey K. Olick, 2005, *In the House of the Hangman: The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943-1949* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).

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As the first legitimation profile loses its grasp due to historical events (the building of the Berlin Wall illustrates that not all rewards promised by "the reliable nation" can be redeemed) and generational change, the "moral nation" arises as the dominant profile (part 3, chapters 9 to 12). This process already starts around the early 1960s, but Olick situates this period more specifically between 1966 (when the German Social Democrats joined the government) and 1974 (when Willy Brandt was replaced as Chancellor by his fellow party member and technocrat Helmut Schmidt). Within this profile, World War II and the Holocaust are not externalised (at least not in such a straightforward sense as in "the reliable nation") but seen as the outcome of developments in German history since the 19th century. Olick furthermore shows how the Holocaust is relativized to the extent that it tends to become one example of a wider trend [282f]. The past is narrated in a less specific and less constraining way as its lesson is to become a moral nation based on a generalised notion of responsibility—responsibility which acknowledges past wrongdoing, but which connects the latter to contemporary world peace and the environment.

The final legitimation profile Olick identifies as characterising West Germany is outlined in part 4 (chapters 13 to 17) and is referred to as "the normal nation", spanning from, roughly, 1975 to the end of the post-war regime in 1989, a period primarily shaped by Helmut Kohl's Chancellorship. Under this conservative chancellor, National Socialism becomes one period amongst many in German history; a dark period—something, though, also experienced by other nations—in an otherwise rich history. As such, this is a political project which attempts to construct legitimacy by offering a non-self-critical national identity. Like others, Olick carves out the lesson proposed in this period in terms of Nazism being a distant past, opening the door for normalisation (as relativization and ritualization).

Having introduced these three profiles, two more chapters provide, first, an epilogue and, second, a concluding chapter. The former, like the prologue, attempts to show how the dialogical principle identified by Olick continues to operate post-1989. This chapter is short, introduces a few conflicts and debates since 1989, and argues that Germany is now able to acknowledge responsibility relatively openly—though it does so in the context of claiming to have mastered the past. The final chapter reflects on the arguments made, e.g. by returning to and discussing the genre dimension of Olick's dialogical approach and by pointing to variables other than the discursive which

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influence official memory such as "party", "confession" and "generation". The chapter ends with concluding thoughts on the ethics of memory and the politics of regret, something prominently raised at the book's beginning, viewing the German experience as "inadequate", but "virtually unprecedented and quite admirable" [466].

Having indicated the task and achievement characterising *The Sins of the Fathers*, both in terms of the empirical and the theoretical, Olick's book also raises issues for further discussion and study. For example, and concerning the empirical aspect of the book, readers would have likely wanted to see much more application of his conceptual framework to the post-1989 period. Such a look at how the "dialogue" about Germany's past has developed more recently would consider in much more detail, first, the "return" of German victims[3] and, second, how in particular the country's difficult past is linked to legitimacy and identity after 1989. Indeed, as normalisation has become less defensive, what if the demands of the present have given rise to a legitimation profile which, although perhaps not dominating, does add complexity to the situation? Here, I think of Olick's claim that the German right has identity without guilt, while the German left has guilt without identity [32]. What, if this is no longer true, at least for the left? What if the claim to have mastered the past, to have "successfully worked through the past", based on acknowledgements and (ritualised) admissions of wrongdoing, serves as the basis for affirming the self and judging others as morally inferior? In fact, Olick touches on such a pattern himself [64, 467], linking it specifically to conflicts in the 1960s, a pattern conceptualised and analysed in terms of a *rhetoric of judge-penitence* [drawing on the Camus novel *The Fall*; see Forchtner 2016: 151-186].[4] To explore this rhetoric within an actual case study would carve out how, yet again, the past is made useful in the present within a great chain of meaning-making. It would furthermore open space to (re)consider the ethics of memory in the light of the counterintuitive and complex way the past is made useful in the present [*ibid.*, 187-214].

This connects neatly to a complex of issues more theoretical/methodological than empirical. As Olick is keen to consider actual language use (as the past is constructed and shaped through communication in context), metaphors, argumentation topoi, intertextuality/interdiscursivity, etc. need to be further scrutinised. Such an opening

[3] Bill Niven, 2006, *Germans as Victims: Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany* (Basingstoke, Palgrave).

[4] Bernhard Forchtner, 2016, *Lessons from the Past. Memory, Narrativity, Subjectivity* (Basingstoke, Palgrave).

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up for insights from linguistic, rhetorical and discourse-analytical scholarship dealing with Germany's (and others') past is an important step in what he calls a "*cultural sociology of retrospection*" [38]. Such a focus could furthermore illuminate Olick's notion of genre, e.g. by drawing on Aristoteles' *Rhetoric* [1926: B1:3][5] and the three "kinds of Rhetoric" (genres): deliberative, forensic and epideictic. Seldom occurring in their pure forms, the latter is especially relevant in the context of commemoration as it is concerned with the present, delivering praise and blame, (re-)establishing values and, thus, subjectivities. Here, work in critical discourse studies might offer a fruitful resource (see recent and classic work, e.g. Richardson and Wodak *et al*. on the discursive construction of memory and legitimacy over time in two different contexts).[6] And as Olick is fundamentally concerned with narrative, Northrop Frye's[7] "narrative archetypes", which describe different modes in which stories can be emplotted, offer a further avenue for exploring the notion of "genre". Such perspectives on genre and beyond promise ways of engaging with, for example, what Olick calls the genres of "victimhood/suffering" and "German traditions", and their respective tasks of exculpating and the building of an affirmable identity.

Surely, the book raises further questions, important questions which will inform the field in the years to come. Indeed, with *The Sins of the Fathers: Germany, Memory, Method*, Olick has added a book to the canon of memory studies which intertwines the empirical and theoretical, and which will be a helpful source for all those interested in German memory, memory studies more generally, and cultural sociology at large.

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[5] Aristotle, 1926, *Art of Rhetoric* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press—Loeb Classical Library, 193).

[6] John Richardson, 2018, "Sharing values to safeguard the future: British Holocaust Memorial Day Commemoration as Epideictic rhetoric", *Discourse and Communication*, 12(2): 171-191; Ruth Wodak, Rudolf de Cillia, Martin Revisigl and Karin Liebhart, 2009 [1999], *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press).

[7] Northrop Frye, 1957, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

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