

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

On the Difficulty of Living Together: Memory, Politics, and History

MANUEL CRUZ

Columbia University Press, 2016; 176 pp.; \$50.00 (hardback)

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In the preface to the recent English translation of his book, *On the Difficulty of Living Together*, Spanish philosopher Manuel Cruz writes that “the best service a text can render the person reading it is precisely to question some of the basic, unarguable, *obvious* convictions that have guided him” (vii). With respect to current convictions about the purpose and value of memory, both individual and collective, his book does an admirable job fulfilling this task. Cruz provides readers with a brief but thought-provoking reflection on the roles that memory, and history more broadly, plays within his contemporary social context (that is, Western Europe in the early 21st Century). He questions the attitude, frequently evinced in our contemporary situation, that history is a source of vital strength and that it can be used to help us *live well*. He goes on to suggest provocatively that an analysis of trauma is essential to repairing contemporary historical discourse.

In the first and second chapters, Cruz undermines the idea that history is a source of strength. He highlights the various ways in which history is taken to have a privileged position with respect to the present, as the “teacher [or master] of life” according to Cicero, and as that which we must take care to know lest we repeat its more horrendous episodes (reflections on trauma form a significant part of a later chapter). Cruz points out the troubling political consequences of this view: that the past may not be experienced as a source of strength by the oppressed. Instead, the past may be a suffocating presence that we must shake off or escape. Little of what Cruz has to say in these opening chapters is particularly new for a philosopher of history, but it does provide an extremely learned discussion of the main issues in contemporary historical interpretation.

Cruz’s book really comes into its own in the third chapter. Having rehearsed a series of typical arguments in favour of the remembrance of history, he turns to particular problems that surround the idea of the traumatic. As he highlights in the previous chapters, historical discourse is frequently oriented around traumas. Traumas are taken as the origins or as the apotheoses of historical periods: the trauma of the Holocaust and

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the post-war period, the First World War and the age of European imperialism, the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington separating two distinct eras of American history, and so on. We are subjected to repeated exhortations to remember them, but such exhortations are frequently suspect because those who exhort us are themselves suspect. As Cruz puts it, “the problem is not the victims ... but rather, the theoretical and practical role they are made to play, the discourse they are used to prop up or legitimize,” and later, “it is far from evident that some of those who step forward in representation of the victims are specifically legitimated to assume that role” (70).

Chapter Four is written with a dual intent. The first section contains a warning to readers against the political tendency toward ‘consistency’ and ‘coherence’ in our historical narratives, a tendency that manifests in the fixing of a ‘founding moment’ of the current era and its institutions. For Cruz, this tendency rests on dubious presuppositions: the existence of “objective memory” (80), and the idea that the justifications for our actions precede (or are at least contemporaneous with) them. Cruz pays particular attention to the latter, suggesting that, when thinking about the decisions that one makes in early adulthood, “is it not the case that in fact we gradually *put ourselves in the right* with the passage of time, finding increasingly refined motives for persevering with the initial decision?” (82).

The second section of Chapter Four is devoted to a warning against the danger of abdicating responsibility for one’s own memory of the past. Cruz ties the political interest in a founding moment to the general availability of the past and its saturation of the present through mass media. Memory enables the emergence of counter-narratives that challenge the dominant political order, but and importantly, memory also enables submission to those same dominant narratives. With the political presentation and re-presentation of the past—a past that is intended to justify the present—the pressure to submit grows and the possibility of counter-narratives withers.

In the final chapter, Cruz turns to an interesting discussion of trauma and its place (or, as he will have it, lack of place) within historical narrative. A traumatic event escapes all pre-existing interpretive schemata, because it is essentially unexpected and strikes those affected by it with “disproportionate intensity” (103). In this sense, it explodes the complacency of a contemporary historical discourse that Cruz evocatively calls “a *machine for cauterizing experience*” (109). That is, this discourse in its normal operation attempts to subsume all events into a politically acceptable, unchallenged order. The traumatic episodes of the past essentially exceed all these attempts, thus opening a space for challenges to that order. Cruz urges readers to “pay serious attention to this, think carefully about the deficiencies of a discourse which does not always appear to have managed to take charge of the specific and particular way in which individuals lived certain events” (109).

Cruz has presented us with an interesting and extremely erudite reflection on the contemporary political situation and its relation to historical discourse. Readers should be aware that, as Cruz warns us in his preface, this book is a personal attempt to grapple with a particular reality (vii). As such, not all threads of Cruz’s thought are followed through to their end and leaps are occasionally made in the argument of the text. Though readers may find this occasionally frustrating, Cruz’s reflections raise so many fruitful questions that the text is well worth the time.

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