Alejandro Baer & Natan Sznajder. “*Memory and forgetting in the post-holocaust era: the ethics of never again*”

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REFERENCES

Alejandro Baer & Natan Sznaider. *Memory and forgetting in the post-holocaust era: the ethics of never again*. Routledge, 2016, 173 p.

- 1 "Never Again!" is a familiar phrase to most of us as it has quickly gained momentum as the rallying cry against genocide in the last few decades. It is said to first have been used by Jews holding up signs at Auschwitz in 1945 and then popularized by Zionist leader Meir Kahane in his 1972 book *"Never Again!": A Program for Survival*. The slogan has now been used countless times by heads of state to encapsulate the idea that we have a moral obligation to recognize the horrors of the past in order not to repeat them. Yet what are the ethics of a statement such as "Never Again"? What is encapsulated in such a loaded statement that is applied in so many contexts for everything from the Holocaust, to Rwanda, to Syria? What are the strengths or pitfalls of a paradigm that has the potential to lock in memory narratives rather than to open them up? In other words, must contemporary generations look to the past in the same way that their parents and grandparents did? Is there a way to think about the past that is more future-oriented? How should genocide and crimes against humanity be remembered and what about all of the things that are not remembered? Are there instances when it's better to forget certain events than to remember them?
- 2 In *Memory and Forgetting in the Post-Holocaust Era: The Ethics of Never Again* authors Alejandro Baer and Natan Sznaider examine acts of remembrance in post-conflict regions and how both memory and forgetting have been utilized in transnational

perspective. They do this to expound on their assertion that "memory has the potential to be open and plural, but it can also close down the political space and actually be turned into a prison". In other words, not all memory works are necessarily positive. And this is a significant statement. We look to the discourse of memory, be it called multidirectional, collective/individual, prosthetic, or "post", to aid us in how we might regard and translate the errors of the past in order to pave the way for a different kind of future. Yet as a tool for healing trauma, memory also has the potential to lockdown historical narratives and hermetically seal the past, making it difficult for current and future generations to build new ways to create a more peaceful and hopeful world.

- 3 Baer and Sznajder examine these ideas by considering how the Holocaust and the memoryworks that developed in its aftermath intersect with the work of activists, writers, and artists in post-fascist Spain and Argentina and in post-communist and post-Soviet Eastern Europe. By looking at "examples of the ambiguities and complexities of memory work" in these sometimes "contested and conflicted post-atrocity narratives" they consider how these communities draw on the terminology and the methodologies of Holocaust discourse to think about the aftermath of violence, but also how they add their own particular method to create something unique as they try to create a narrative about the past for the future. Two noteworthy ideas that seem to rise to the surface are about (1) how memory has shifted from a primarily national perspective to a *transnational* and global one in the attempt to heal after a traumatic event during which crimes against humanity were committed on a vast scale, and (2) what the possibilities are for a new generation of memory writers, activists, and artists to look at the past in order to construct a new, perhaps hopeful, *future*, while still keeping the ever-present potential for mass violence in their sites.
- 4 So how does a nation find the correct balance "between memory and forgetting, justice and forgiveness"? This is a question dealt with in Chapter 2, "Nunca Más: Argentine Nazis and Judíos del Sur". Here, Baer and Sznajder look at how Argentina reads its own terror in the 1970s through the prism of the Holocaust and the concept of "genocide". It is important to note, as the authors do, that this is the only chapter on a non-European country. This is not chance. The authors remind us that it's important to remember how much Argentina has always aligned itself with European values (the good and the bad), barring its geographical location in the southern cone. In particular, they examine how the memorial work that has been carried out by writers, scholars and activists, as part of the transitional justice process is looking to the discourse of the Holocaust, its language and its symbolism, to shape its own legacy of memory politics. For example, the anti-Semitic Argentine dictatorship looked back to the Nazis for their terminology and methodologies. Yet post-Holocaust discourses about remembrance, witnessing and healing were used by those hoping to recover in the aftermath of the junta and consolidate memory narratives.
- 5 The remaining chapters continue to examine the influence of Holocaust memory on other regions. They show how specific processes of memorialization and reconciliation attempt to both reflect particular historical circumstances while they also engage with transnational and cosmopolitan interpretations of genocide discourse over several generations. Chapter 3, "Francoism Reframed: The Disappeared of the Spanish Holocaust", discusses the case of the Spanish Civil War and how the "so-called recuperation of historical memory" is located in the "bones of the exhumed victims of Franco's violence". For Spain, the authors consider how a memory trope based on

Holocaust discourse has been developed that focuses on “de-politicized victimhood”, rather than on the historical event itself. This paradigm consolidates a communal narrative of a shared violent past, similar to Argentina. Chapter 4, “Eastern Europe: Exhuming Competing Pasts”, considers a post-Stalinist and post-Soviet Europe, examining how it configures both post-communist *and* post-fascist memory (rather than the post-fascist reality of Spain or Argentina). They note how the region remains engaged with Holocaust memory discourse, but deals with the memory of communist crimes very differently than Spain and Argentina do with post-fascism. For example, in Ukraine “genocide discourse polarizes society and alienates the Russian population” because of competing interpretations of the past. And in Bosnia we can see how the use of the language and symbolism of genocide discourse “enables the maintenance and reinforcement of ethno-religious boundaries” which seem to block any kind of progress for communities seeking reconciliation and that must live together in the shadow of the recent past.

- 6 Thus, Baer and Sznaider compel us to consider how these two memory trajectories (Spain/Argentina and Eastern Europe) differ politically and historically. Yet they also examine how they intersect and relate to each other through their adoption of Holocaust and genocide discourse. Furthermore, they address issues that arise in the contemporary world theatre of transnational memory studies for the current generations who have inherited a particular framework of remembrance and memorialization that may not be representative for them.
- 7 As a final note, it is thought-provoking to consider that this book and David Reiff’s *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies* (Yale University Press, 2016) were released within months of each other. The two studies, although different in approach and tone, seem to dialogue about the status quo, which states that there is a moral imperative to remember and which assumes that it is immoral to forget. Neither text comes to a definite conclusion about how to circumvent this accepted trope, but whereas Reiff gets close to some kind of judgment when, near the end of this book, he considers “whether we should stop praising remembrance and start praising forgetting” (Reiff 2016, 126), Baer and Sznaider wrap up their study with a “sociology of hope” to counter the rigid formula of the Never Again paradigm. The two insist that this concept of hope is not a dreamy, utopian ideal. Rather, they present this theory in order to leave open the possibility for looking to the future rather than always being beholden to the past. They recognize that there are many different ways to partially alleviate the suffering that the Never Again paradigm refers to, but “come to the conclusion that there is no healing of trauma – only taking the edge off”. Maybe it is also a way for current and future generations of activists, what Baer and Sznaider refer to as “concrete people”, to loosen the grip that memory discourse has on their history. It is to have the option to “address the injustices of past and present” and to establish alternative ways of thinking about the past that are more hopeful than their predecessors.