

Editor's Picks

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This issue of the journal is being assembled at the confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restricted population movement, physical distancing and fears of contagion, the resultant severe economic downturn, and the eruption of racial protests and demands for a racial reckoning in the United States with global ripples. Looming in the background is increased evidence of the planet's degradation and environmental change. I am mindful of the psychological, intellectual, and practical challenges presented by this tsunami. The books and media introduced here address only one aspect: harnessing the power and prestige of museums toward racial reconciliation in the United States and a more just society.

SUSAN NEIMAN: Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2019. 432 pp.

Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung is a word with as many letters as the English alphabet, with a range of nuanced meanings, and it is inextricably linked to the long and painful processes undertaken by post-Third Reich Germany to confront its Nazi past and the evils of the Holocaust. English translations have ranged from “struggle to overcome the [negatives of the] past” or “working through the past” or a “process of coming to terms with the past.” In this eloquent book, moral philosopher Susan Neiman implores Americans to listen and learn from these decades-long processes, which she believes can help address the structural heritage of slavery in the United States and its ramifications, which directly impact nearly 44,000,000 American citizens daily.

Neiman, a Jewish-American philosopher, has been the director of the Einstein Forum, a public think tank outside of Berlin since 2000. She grew up in Atlanta, Georgia and previously lived in the Northeastern United States (while at Harvard and Yale), Mississippi, and Tel-Aviv. By exploring the differences between Germany's *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* and the American experience, she hopes Americans, as well as others, will learn from the Germans.

In the first third of the volume, “German Lessons,” Neiman tells the story of the long and laborious path Germans faced in their efforts to admit and atone for the heinous crimes of the Holocaust. She takes meticulous care in her narrative to distance herself from comparing the evils of the Third Reich with those of slavery in the American South. She writes, “This book is about comparative redemption, not comparative evil.” (p. 32)

The focus on process allows Neiman to ask, “Did the forms [racism] took in America preclude the sort of atonement that has taken place in Germany?” (p.34) and inquire plaintively, “Slavery ended in [the U.S.in] the nineteenth century, why are we still talking about it in the twenty first?”

In the next third, “Southern Discomfort,” she turns to the American South. Although Neiman’s primary scrutiny is Mississippi, rather than the United States as a whole (just as in Germany the focus is on Berlin), she shows that glorification of the Confederate past by whites is not limited to Mississippi: “Southern homes display their Confederate memorabilia proudly, and Southern stores make considerable profits selling it” (p.180). Commemoration in private sites and public sites (e.g., Confederate monuments on courthouse grounds), and profitable commerce (BEST 2020), sustain the myth, the entrenched belief, that the Confederacy fought bravely and valiantly for a noble purpose, i.e., the Lost Cause.

Neiman contrasts this with the post-war, decades long, consensus public memory and extensive historical study in Germany of a mythical “clean” unified Armed Forces, the Wehrmacht: an honorable force, which avoided participation in atrocities and maintained distance from the Nazi regime. By the 1990s, careful scholarship began to puncture this fable with evidence that the Wehrmacht played an active and often instigative role in the genocide of Eastern European Jews. One exhibition, *Wehrmachtsausstellung* (Wehrmacht Exhibition), officially titled “War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944”, is credited with shattering this myth. The exhibition was developed and implemented by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. Between 1995 and 2000, close to one million people viewed it in 33 German and Austrian cities, a revised version was on tour from 2001-2004, and it is now permanently installed in Berlin’s *Deutsches Historisches Museum*. The thrust of Neiman’s argument is that a comparable nationwide public reckoning of the Civil War has not taken place in the United States.

Neiman praises the work of local efforts towards understanding and reconciliation in the South and stresses their importance. For example, she describes the work of, and pushback from the public against, the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation at the University of Mississippi (where she spent a sabbatical year). Neiman also notes the positive role of museums, e.g. the recently established Mississippi Civil Rights Museum in Jackson, the state capital, as encouraging conversation and applauds efforts that do not ‘sugarcoat’ or varnish the truth (COTTER 2017).

That vigilance, reinforcement, and care are essential for any process to succeed are lessons that Neiman repeatedly and emphatically emphasizes. She does not present *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* as a panacea, nor does she see it as a process of the past. These cautions and caveats are especially evident in the last part of the book, where Neiman tackles Germany’s far right political party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the rise of the American extreme right.

The book has an engrossing narrative style, littered with engaging biographical anecdotes. However, it is tempting to reorganize the book around a 2.5-page discussion (pp. 84-86) of five “crucial facets of any successful attempt to work off a nation’s criminal past.” These are abbreviated here:

1. “The nation must achieve a coherent and widely accepted national narrative.” As she shows, “Nazis were Bad, Defeating them was Good” was an accepted narrative in East Germany and, after much ambivalence, accepted in West Germany.
2. “Narratives start with words and are reinforced with symbols, and many symbols involve remembering the dead.” This is effectively supported by her comparison of extant Confederate monuments and Holocaust memorials, most vividly Berlin’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Neiman’s interview with Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery, Alabama, points out that the Berlin Memorial inspired the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, where 805 hanging steel rectangles represent each of the US counties where a lynching took place, completed by the EJI in 2018.
3. “Narratives are transported through education,” is demonstrated by discussions of the current central role the study of Nazism has in history, art, and literature classes.

4. “Words are even more powerful when set to music.” Neiman’s point is that national anthems express its people’s best hopes and suggests rewriting America’s.
5. The final point is more of a question “What about things that are less symbolic: hard, cold things like prison cells and cash? Here she addresses both bringing perpetrators to justice and reparations. The latter extensively implemented in Germany and even now, at the margins of conversation in the U.S.

It is with Neiman’s overall narrative as a backdrop, and her position that museums can play positive roles in affecting attitudes, that the collection assembled by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell, discussed next, should be viewed.

ROBERT R. JANES, RICHARD SANDELL (Eds.): *Museum Activism*. Routledge. 2019. 436 pp.

For well over a decade, Robert Janes, an independent scholar-practitioner, and a former museum director (Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada) and Richard Sandell, a professor of museum studies and director of a research center for museums and galleries at the University of Leicester,

have interrogated and challenged the (conservative, tradition-bound, risk-averse) ‘best practices,’ and ‘sacred’ beliefs of museums, and vigorously promoted social responsibility and a more humanized *gestalt*.

The messages of this book? First, disregard a vision of ‘activism’ as the use of confrontational public methods — protests, placards, marches, pamphlets, sit-ins, disruptions — as instruments of change. Janes and Sandell launch us with a more benign definition: “... museum activism, in the sense of museum practice, shaped out of ethically-informed values, that is intended to bring about political, social and environmental change.” Their basic assumption is that, in the early 21st century, the mission, role, values, and responsibilities of museums require radical rethinking. (I would go further and state that museums’ time for reflection and rethinking has expired, as I discuss in a recent publication (2020). Whether academician or practitioner, this volume is your handbook for addressing the racial and social injustice, violations of human rights, and environmental degradation facing us. Why? Museum activism is the