



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization

Brad Prager

Journal of Jewish Identities, Issue 3, Number 2, July 2010, pp.
96-97 (Review)

Published by Youngstown State University Center for Judaic and Holocaust Studies



For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jji/summary/v003/3.2.prager.html>



Michael Rothberg. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009. Pp, xvii, 379. Cloth \$70.00. ISBN: 0804762171. Paper \$24.95. ISBN: 080476218X.

Academics and non-academics have with equal ease erroneously asserted that varied cultural memories of violence, or reconstructions of victimhood in the public sphere, risk crowding each other out when placed in proximity. Is there is only room for a finite amount of memorial culture? Must memories stand in hierarchical relationships to one another? Equations along these lines are typically mobilized for ideological purposes, but, as Michael Rothberg asserts, collective memory and its communication need not function similarly to "real estate development" (2). Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* aims to steer the discussion of memory away from competitive models and find an alternative to the constraining logic of analogies. Because analogies compare non-identical objects, their equations are inevitably imperfect; they rarely do justice to history's nuances and they therefore leave behind remainders that serve as the basis for turf wars, or for unproductive conflicts over whether one attempted genocide was worse, more atrocious, or more incomparable than another. For Rothberg, it is not a matter of resolving such wars so much as rejecting, as yet another inadequate analogy, the notion of turf. In its place he offers a more flexible hermeneutic model, which he describes as "multidirectional."

Among the many discourses to which Rothberg responds is the frequently asserted rhetoric of "uniqueness," or the claim that the Holocaust resembles nothing that came before it. In some circles all such comparisons remain censured, yet the most dogmatic voices seem to be fading. One hears these assertions less and less, and those who make them seem increasingly unconvinced. The Holocaust may indeed be distinct from other genocides because of the specific manner in which Jews were racialized and because of the particular vagaries of eliminationist anti-Semitism. It also may be worthy of special consideration in some unique way owing to its status as a function of advanced German modernity. However, these particularities *pace* Rothberg should rather be taken as vectors informing broader-based discussions, not as the reason to abandon them. Every historical atrocity is distinct, yet all atrocities become part of the same contemporary cultural-historical fabric. The guiding principle is one of an inexorable interpretive project where cultural memory is concerned. The questions should keep coming, and the cultural constructions of memory benefit most from critical evaluation; more rigorous work is required and less deference to taboos.

The aims of Rothberg's extraordinarily intelligent and insightful study are clear: he calls for a form of comparative thinking not afraid to traverse borders (17), and one that works through rather than runs from the "partial overlaps" (29). Subsequent to stating his aims Rothberg offers chapter after chapter of trenchant and thoughtful analyses, including informed considerations of writings by Hannah Arendt, Caryl Phillips, Charlotte Delbo and others. His laud-

able inclination is to gravitate toward passages most readers have overlooked. For instance, although some commentators have noted the reference to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) in Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), very few have paid such close attention to Arendt's language and to the contradictions produced upon considering the logical consequences of her comparisons. In that same chapter Rothberg offers a studied reading of Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950/1955) and takes seriously, from the perspective of Holocaust Studies, the provocative claim that Hitler was the uncanny return of the West's genocidal past. From Césaire's writings Rothberg draws the metaphor of the "boomerang effect," which, in its original formulation, describes a "shock," and thus overlaps with key motifs that structure Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history. He builds his argument on a multiplicity of theoretical terms. Rothberg is sometimes inspired by Benjamin's uncanny ability to read the past for its contradictions and against the grain of progress, and at other points he leans eruditely on contemporary research.

As someone who avoids simple binary oppositions, W.E.B. Du Bois becomes a paradigmatic model for Rothberg's third way. Rothberg treats Du Bois's essay, "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto," first published in 1952, as a multidirectional text that traverses a series of interconnected spaces. The most compelling part of Rothberg's reading of Du Bois arrives as he teases out the ramifications of Du Bois's observations about Nathan Rapoport's Warsaw Ghetto Monument. This double-sided monument serves as an occasion not only for a better understanding of Du Bois's thinking about race, but also for a cogent articulation of the methodology of multidirectional memory. Owing to the Monument's own ambiguity – its double-face – it operates as an exemplar and as a centerpiece of the book.

One can, however, assert that this refined study of multidirectional memory has many centerpieces. Beyond its chapters on Du Bois and Arendt, the new perspective it offers on the year 1961 as a major dividing line is particularly profound. Was that year, owing to the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a turning point in Holocaust discourse? Yes and no. Rothberg acknowledges that this moment was not the first time the Holocaust was acknowledged, but rather that the survivor and the concept of survivor testimony here entered the broader public imaginary. He examines this development relative both to shifts in European colonial discourse and to the appearance of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). Rothberg is extremely insightful where the history of *cinéma vérité* is concerned, and anyone interested in its development should refer to his close reading of sequences in Rouch and Morin's film. Rothberg's chapter sheds light on the differences between the two filmmakers' views about the possibilities associated with their new style. Similarly subtle is his original reading of Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005) in light of the 1997-98 trial of the collaborator Maurice Papon. Here, as throughout this informed study, he brings a uniquely broad perspective to bear. Even among the number of recent readings of Haneke's film, Rothberg's well-considered perspective stands out.

Brad Prager, University of Missouri