

Michael ROTHBERG, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford University Press, 2009.

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Commemorations of great communal suffering — of genocide, or the violence of colonialism, or a history of slavery — often provoke thoughtful comparisons with similar collective traumas, but also lead to unproductive and divisive competitions for public attention among victimized groups. For example, critics of the federally funded United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. have suggested that the space it occupies, both literally and in the national collective consciousness, crowds out the remembrance of other traumatic events, like the enslavement of Africans and the near annihilation of Native Americans, which are far more important in American history. Meanwhile, some proponents of Holocaust memory have insisted, at times myopically, on its unique, incomparable nature. Does this model, which tends to detach the Nazi genocide from the broader history of genocide, help to generate some of the antagonistic rivalries over which marginalized groups suffered the most in the past? Moreover, must evocations of the Holocaust necessarily obstruct recollections of the violence on which America was founded? Or has knowledge of the ghettos and deportations helped us to think more clearly about other histories and remember them with greater specificity? In other words, are different collective memories of trauma entirely separable and only in competition with one another, or are they just as often remembered in our global culture — and more usefully understood — as individual chapters in humanity's terrible book of xenophobia and racism?

In his ground-breaking book, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Michael Rothberg addresses precisely these kinds of questions. In numerous close readings of a great variety of texts, from essays and engaged journalism to novels, films, photographs and paintings, Rothberg finds evidence for his claim that the production of cultural memory is not merely a competition, but a fruitful, dialogic process, a back-and-forth in time and space that he calls « multidirectional memory ». « Against the framework that understands collective memory as *competitive* memory — as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources — I suggest that we consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative » (3, the emphases are in the original text).

While marginalized groups demand retroactive justice, *Multidirectional Memory* explores another aspect of the complex work of memory: how each other's voices. often on a dark subject matter, this book challenges the individualism of postmodernism. Memories of past traumas are shared, hybrid dimensions of collective experience, a basis for solidarity and

To illustrate his argument, Rothberg looks at the Holocaust in France in the 1950s and during the Algerian War. He explores how « the architecture of memory » in a context in which memory is often found — and this has been done persuasively — is that the forms in which it has been remembered are intertwined with contemporary events. The suppression of Algeria's *cinéma de la Nouvelle Vague*, for example, in *of a Summer*, directed by Jean-Louis Godé, is an example of the confluence of these scenes of Parisians discussing the Algerian War. In one scene, she and an anti-Semitic character. In the next scene, she walks through the city to remember and narrate. Rothberg argues that « Marceline's memory is meaningful in a discursive context of testimony, and resistance to Nazi atrocities » (195). Rothberg reawakens traumatic memories, foretells a traumatic history for others, that will haunt France. He heard in the last chapter of

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While marginalized groups do compete for public acknowledgment and retroactive justice, *Multidirectional Memory* asserts that this is merely one aspect of the complex ways victims meet in the public realm and stimulate each other's voices, often to the benefit of all. Despite its predominantly dark subject matter, this ambitious book is pervaded by a reasonable optimism. Memories of persecution need not divide peoples; indeed, the shared, hybrid dimension of public memory, its « multidirectionality » offers a basis for solidarity and justice.

To illustrate his general concept, Rothberg focuses much of the time on France in the 1950s and early 1960s, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and during the Algerian War of Independence. As promised by his subtitle, he explores how « the actuality of decolonization struggles helps produce a context in which memory of the Shoah can be articulated » (197). What he finds — and this has never before been presented so thoroughly and persuasively — is that the articulation of Holocaust memory, and the very forms in which it has been expressed over the last fifty years, were deeply entwined with contemporary responses in France to the state's brutal suppression of Algeria's bid for self-rule. The 1961 documentary *Chronicle of a Summer*, directed by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, offers a prime example of the confluence of these two histories. The film juxtaposes scenes of Parisians discussing, sometimes indifferently, the violence in Algeria, with scenes featuring a French Auschwitz survivor, Marceline. In one scene, she and an African student find striking similarities between anti-Semitism and racism, between present violence and past trauma. In the next scene, she walks among Paris landmarks that prompt her to remember and narrate, for the first time in public, her arrest and deportation from the city years before. Reading « multidirectionally » Rothberg argues that « Marceline's testimony was made possible by and became meaningful in a discursive context in which the association of torture, truth, testimony, and resistance underwrote a link between the Algerian War and Nazi atrocities » (195). If state violence in the contemporary moment reawakens traumatic memories of the Holocaust, it also true that the film foretells a traumatic history of colonialism, to be narrated by Algerians and others, that will haunt France for decades to come. In fact, such voices are heard in the last chapter of *Multidirectional Memory*, to which I will return.

Rothberg reminds us that at the moment *Chronicle of a Summer* was made, just as the 1961 Eichmann trial was concluding in Israel, the Holocaust was not widely known and the word itself was not even in general use. Furthermore, he argues that the film, with its cinematic staging of Holocaust survivor testimony in the context of decolonization, offers a radical challenge to the standard notion that the testimony heard at the

Eichmann trial almost single-handedly shaped and amplified Holocaust memory after a relative silence in the public sphere from 1945 to 1960. « While absent from scholarship on memory of the Nazi genocide for more than forty years, *Chronicle of a Summer's* almost forgotten scene of Holocaust testimony suggests the need to look beyond the Eichmann trial for other instances of Holocaust remembrance in the public sphere at this key moment of Holocaust memory's transformation. The pursuit of such instances... has the power to alter substantially understanding of the evolution of the Holocaust's meanings; revealing unexpected moments of multidirectional memory contributes to an archaeology of non-dominant forces at work during the very consolidation of the Holocaust's significance as a unique event. Even if evidence of these forces was not ultimately preserved in dominant archives, their recovery has considerable implications for the theorization of collective memory beyond a competitive, zero-sum logic. The juxtaposition in *Chronicle of a Summer* of the memory of the Nazi genocide and the history of decolonization provides an opportunity to rethink the 'unique' place that the Holocaust has come to hold in discourses on extreme violence » (178-79). Rothberg's archaeological study reveals that our concept of what the Holocaust is, and what it means, owes as much to forgotten analogies and comparisons with other collective traumas as it does to our knowledge of the Holocaust's many unprecedented elements. Even if it made no other such original and compelling arguments, *Multidirectional Memory* would be one of the most significant books in Holocaust studies of the last several years. While it sheds light on the particular history of Holocaust memory, its well-argued conclusions also strongly validate new interdisciplinary trends in comparative genocide studies. It models such scholarship effectively by bringing together Holocaust studies and postcolonial studies for the first time. And, with its conceptualization of multidirectional memory, this book promises to inspire other innovative comparative studies in the future.

Rothberg unearths still more new evidence for the multidirectional quality of Holocaust memory in Charlotte Delbo's first book, *Les belles lettres*, published in 1961, four years before the appearance of *None of Us Will Return*, the first volume of her canonical Auschwitz trilogy. In *Les belles lettres*, Delbo reprints a variety of letters to newspaper editors about the Algerian War of Independence to which she responds from a leftist, anti-war perspective, despite the fact that, at the time, the French government heavily censored most attempts to criticize its policies in an effort to control public discourse about the war. Until now, remarkably little attention has been paid to how the ethics and politics of decolonization in France helped set the stage for Delbo's powerful Holocaust testimony and, more

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broadly, for the entry of personal recollections like hers into the communal sphere. In reviewing this history, Rothberg draws on Michael Warner's theory of publics and counterpublics to argue that testimony such as Delbo's does not simply come into an already defined space of public memory, but actually helps to create that politicized space and determine its contours, sometimes in resistance to the state. Rothberg calls Delbo's oppositional writing « counterpublic testimony » because it challenges state-approved forms of public discourse. It also shows the limits of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's influential notion that the act of testifying to a traumatic experience is, above all, an intimate therapeutic dialogue between the witness and her listener. Rothberg shows that, to a large degree, the very form and meaning of personal testimony, whether by victims or witnesses, is determined within the public spaces of politics, history and justice where diverse memories collide and mutate through the processes of multidirectional memory.

Recovered memories of both the Holocaust and the colonial violence suffered by Algerians actually merge in the figure of Maurice Papon. It was only in the 1980s, when Papon was indicted for his role in the deportation of Jews under the Vichy government, that the public at-large became aware of his responsibility, as chief of the Paris police, for the October 17, 1961 massacre of perhaps 200 peaceful demonstrators who marched in favor of Algeria's independence. Before the Papon trial, the dominant view that the histories of the Holocaust and colonialism were altogether separate almost obliterated the common memory that linked them in France. Through analyses of contemporary fiction and journalism, including a little known piece by Marguerite Duras, Rothberg shows that, from the very beginning, the Holocaust was consistently invoked in responses to the events of 1961, especially as the colonialist rhetoric of the time became increasingly racist. Memory is indeed multidirectional: remembrance of the Holocaust grew in the context of the decolonization of Algeria; at the same time, memories of that decolonization took shape in the context of contemporaneous discussions about what happened during World War II. In « The Two Ghettos » Duras draws an analogy between the segregation endured by Jews and the racist policies directed at Algerians in both France and Algeria. Weaving together the struggles of African Americans, European Jews, and Algerian Muslims, multidirectional memory is very much in evidence in *The Stone Face*, a neglected 1963 novel by the African American writer William Gardner Smith. In their use of the suffering of the European Jews to understand other collective traumas, these texts offer Rothberg an occasion to revisit the common notion that the Holocaust transcends its particular meaning for the Jewish people to function as a

kind of universal signifier for profound evil and inhumanity. What he finds is that multidirectional memory offers a better account of the Holocaust's relation to other histories than does its putative universality. « The Holocaust does not simply become a universal moral standard that can then be applied to other histories; rather, some of those *other histories help produce a sense of the Holocaust's particularity*. At the same time, people impacted by the histories of colonialism and decolonization refer to this emergent understanding of the Holocaust as part of a *shared but not necessarily universal* moral and political project. Far from being a floating, universal signifier, the Holocaust emerges in its specificity as part of a multidirectional network of diverse histories of extreme violence, torture, and racist policy » (244, the emphases are in the original text). *Multidirectional Memory* brings an innovative approach to the universal/particular opposition, another important issue in Holocaust studies that has implications for comparative genocide studies.

The final chapter of the book discusses texts produced between 1984 and 2005 that remember the October 1961 massacre from the perspective of the second generation — those who have inherited traumatic memories not experienced firsthand, a condition Marianne Hirsch has called « post-memory ». Of course, the children of the victims are most affected by post-memory, but the children of perpetrators suffer from it, too, as do, to a much lesser degree, entire societies. Both Algeria and France are still burdened by the memories of colonial violence that cannot be ignored. An implicit principle in *Multidirectional Memory*, and in the entire field of genocide studies, is that past violence leaves a legacy to which we must respond ethically in the present. Rothberg analyzes three texts that honor this commitment: a novel by the French detective fiction writer Didier Daeninckx, the Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke's 2005 feature film *Caché*, and a novel for young adults by French-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar. All three enact what Rothberg calls « a multidirectional ethics of memory », a complex attitude toward the past that forces the reader or viewer to contend with the ambiguity that arises from multiple histories — in this case, not only the Algerian War of Independence and the Holocaust, but also the civil war in Algeria in the 1990s, and the war on terrorism of the following decade. Here, too, Rothberg finds evidence to support his central contention « that coming to terms with the past always happens in comparative contexts and via the circulation of memories linked to what are only apparently separate histories and national or ethnic constituencies » (272).

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Holocaust memory and the Algerian War of Independence, and also explores some interesting points of contact between Holocaust remembrance and the legacies of the African diaspora in the new world. Rothberg begins his book with an analysis of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1955), one of the first studies to argue that European imperialism, in conjunction with anti-Semitism, created the conditions that made the Holocaust possible. European colonialists returned from Africa with the knowledge that the human being stripped of all the «unnatural» trappings of civilization, of culture and law, is the most fragile, most dismissible person. This concept — Giorgio Agamben later called it «bare life» — reached its fruition in the Muselmann, the ultimate product of the Nazi extermination camps. However, Rothberg is persuasive in arguing that Arendt's analysis is strongly Eurocentric, and that it runs the risk, in the fashion of «competitive memory» of silencing one history of violence to convey another. Rather than «understanding the traumatic nature of the physical and epistemic violence of colonialism as productive of the natural/unnatural humanity opposition, [...] the logic of her argument is that the Nazis turn their victims (and even their own adherents) into the de-individualized humans that Africans already are. This asymmetry leaves an unsettling mark on Arendt's account, despite the power and originality of the link she makes between the destruction wrought by the camps and that of imperialism» (61).

To complement his discussion of Arendt, Rothberg turns to Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950/1955), which states explicitly that the racist brutality of European colonialism «boomeranged» to produce the Holocaust. The trauma suffered by the perpetrators of colonial violence, which Europe disavowed, returned to its source and found expression in the genocide of the Jews. Rothberg uses Césaire's polemical work to postulate a multidirectional theory of trauma that offers a remedy to the Eurocentric quality of contemporary trauma studies and, at the same time, promises to put an end to unproductive competitions over which victims suffered the most profound traumatization. In the past, most Holocaust scholars have ignored the multidirectional links between colonialism and Nazism. Now, Rothberg argues persuasively for the necessity of a «colonial turn» in Holocaust studies, and for more sophisticated thinking about the links between imperialism and the genealogy of «bare life». I have already shown how he applies such insights to uncover connections in Holocaust memory and the decolonization of Algeria.

In the remaining chapters, Rothberg discusses the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, André Schwarz-Bart, and Caryl Phillips, three writers who in a multidirectional fashion link the legacies of slavery and the African diaspora with

those of the Holocaust. In 1952, Du Bois wrote a short essay, « The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto » in which, according Rothberg, « he demonstrates how the other's history and memory can serve as a source of renewal and reconfiguration for the self — granted one is willing to give up exclusive claims to ultimate victimization and ownership over suffering » (132). After the publication of his canonical Holocaust tale *The Last of the Just*, Schwarz-Bart wrote *A Woman Named Solitude*, a 1972 novel about Caribbean slavery that is marked by metaphors and analogies that relate it to Jewish history and the Holocaust. Phillips, a contemporary author, has written novels such as *Higher Ground*, which uses three vignettes to juxtapose the lives of a nineteenth century African involved in the slave trade, an African American imprisoned for armed robbery in the 1960s, and a Polish Jewish refugee in post-war England. Rothberg notes that « Phillips's writings do not establish an equation between black and Jewish history, or even strictly parallel histories, as can be found in Schwarz-Bart, but rather highlight both similar structural problems within those histories and missed encounters between them » (137).

Both Rothberg's first book, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (2000), and his second, *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings* (2003), edited with Neil Levi, conclude with brief discussions of about what happens when different groups who have experienced genocide and diaspora meet in public dialogue. These earlier works seem to predict the path Rothberg's scholarship has taken in *Multidirectional Memory*. In this new book, he shows that Holocaust memory — how the Nazi genocide has been represented and understood — is inexorably linked to other histories, and that the field of Holocaust studies, without losing its particular concerns, is most usefully located in the broader fields of genocide and memory studies. Rothberg's overarching claim, which has important implications for many fields of inquiry, is that group identities are not formed in isolation, as conventional wisdom has it, but in the multidirectional, public spheres of politics, history, and justice, in which bearers of memory negotiate and coexist even as they compete.

In the epilogue to this excellent book, Rothberg reflects briefly on the applicability of multidirectional analyses to current sites of conflict where the memories of diverse groups appear to be irreconcilable, with specific reference to the Israelis and Palestinians. « I draw two corollaries from the kinds of memory conflicts emblemized by the Israeli/Palestinian dispute. First, we cannot stem the structural multidirectionality of memory. Even if it were desirable — as it sometimes seems to be — to maintain a wall, or *cordon sanitaire*, between different histories, it is not possible to do so.

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Memories are mobile; histories are implicated in each other. Thus, finally, understanding political conflict entails understanding the interlacing of memories in the force field of public space. The only way forward is through their entanglement » (313). Thanks to Rothberg, we are able to engage more thoughtfully with our knotted past — and with our tangled future, too.