Book Review

Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.

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Truro, the capital of Cornwall, is a usually quiet and peaceful town in the middle of a predominantly white county. In a corner of the town's square, in front of Truro's city council, stands a bronze statue of a soldier, rifle in left hand, holding his helmet aloft in his right hand. It is the war memorial, listing the names of the fallen in WW1, WW2, the Falklands War of 1982, and Afghanistan. Pedestrians usually pass by it without paying much attention, except during Remembrance Day in November, when its pedestal is covered with poppies and wreaths.

In June 2020 a group of people of all ages, mostly white, demonstrated in town protesting about the death of George Floyd, the African American man murdered by police during an arrest in May 2020. They carried signs saying, "black lives matter" or "I can't breathe". It was an orderly protest, which even gave way to buses on their regular routes. Yet, when the protestors arrived at the town square, they found a group of men standing in defiance around the war monument, "to protect it", so they said. One of them explained to the press that his grandfather "fought for this country [the United Kingdom and they [Black Lives Matter demonstrators] are fighting against us".

A white man who, alongside those who stand with him, considers it a threat when other white people say, "Black Lives Matter". White people who consider that fighting for racial equality goes against the memory of those who died for king and country.

Obviously, the images of American protestors tearing down statues in the United States played a part in this fear of Truro's war monument being vandalized, but waters

run deeper. If the racial divide can be so provocative in Cornwall, where it is difficult to find non-white people, it is not difficult to imagine the fury it can provoke in territories where racial conflict is ingrained in the history of the land, such as the US Southern states. Them against us, as if being black precluded the possibility of being British. Them against us, as if being black implied being excluded from Southern identity. Is it ever possible to overcome this disjunctive? Is it possible to look at the past in a different way, without anger, learning from old mistakes and trying to move on in a more peaceful way? American moral philosopher, cultural commentator, and essayist Susan Neiman, a Jewish woman born in Atlanta, Georgia, who has lived in Israel and Berlin, where she is the director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, thinks so.

Her book *Learning from the Germans. Race and the Memory of Evil* examines German efforts to atone for Nazi atrocities and identifies lessons on how the United States might come to terms with its legacy of slavery and racism. Divided into three parts (German lessons, Southern discomfort, and Setting things straight), the book brings together historical and philosophical analysis; interviews with politicians, activists, and contemporary witnesses in Germany and the United States; and Neiman's own first-person observations as a white woman growing up in the South and a Jewish woman who has lived for almost three decades in Berlin.

The basic tenet of the text is that Germany did a good job coming to terms with its Nazi past, *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* as it called in German, "working through the past", more in Eastern Germany than in the Federal Republic, and that the United States could learn a lesson or two about managing the memory of slavery and the American Civil War. To demonstrate her point, Neuman takes the reader not exactly down the memory lane but through contemporary Germany and the United States, to evaluate the initiatives that today acknowledge the past and try to build national narratives without denying it. In the German case, Neuman describes the work done in both East and West Germany after the end of WW2, she interviews people from both countries, and concludes that East Germany was more engaged in its denazification program, because it created a narrative which relished antifascism, something which implied that the Holocaust and its memory was engulfed in a bigger discourse, the Communist fight against fascism. Because of this point of view, Neuman has been accused of creating a German Lost Cause narrative, parallel to the Southern Lost Cause narrative, sympathetic to German Democratic Republic (Berg), a narrative which downplays the crimes of Communism. Thus, in her discussion of the Soviet war memorial in Berlin's Treptower Park, her silence about the mass rape of German women by Russian soldiers after the occupation of Berlin somehow undermines her argument.

To discuss racism and the memory of slavery in the United States, Neuman visited the state of Mississippi and talked with both white and black people to hear their points of view and to find out what kind of initiatives are taking place to come to terms with slavery and segregation. Her description of Emmett Till's brutal death and the work done at the Emmett Till Interpretive Center is very moving and clearly shows the kind of rage that racial differences provoke in Southern US. As just one example, the Emmett Till Memorial sign has had to be replaced four times since erected, because it has been vandalized and shot at on several occasions; the latest sign, put in place in 2019, is bulletproof, made of steel and weighs 500 pounds.

However, maybe because her book is not aimed at a scholarly audience, Neuman does not engage with existing scholarship about US slavery, racism, and white supremacy (Araujo). Neither does she use fiction as a resource to describe collective experiences (King), something which could have been more engaging for the reader. Therefore, we are left with a list of interesting initiatives, but we do not really know about any future course of action. Neuman raises some points that would have served as an effective framework for her argument:

- the creation and widespread acceptance of a national narrative about the past,
- the use of symbols to reinforce this narrative,
- the value of transmitting the narrative via education,
- the role of music, especially national anthems,
- the place of justice, restitution, and reparations as a response to past crimes,

But she sets them aside and does not develop them any further. The lack of deep analysis of primary or secondary sources makes this book an example of popularization of history, but then the reader misses a good introduction to denazification in Germany and reconstruction in the United States. Without them, Neuman makes assumptions and expects the reader to know about the subject, omitting significant information which would have made her argument clearer.

Again, since this is not a scholarly book, Neuman's bias is evident, and rightly so. Both Nazi crimes and racial segregation violated human rights, and it is therefore fair that Neuman takes a stand against them. However, comparing slavery in the US to the Holocaust cannot really help to come to terms with "the granular ubiquity of American racism" (Laqueur). Apart from that, it is important to remember that Germany was forced to come to terms with its past because it was occupied by the Allies, while the Union never pressured the Confederacy to do so, for the sake of reconciliation. At the end of the day, aside from presenting interesting initiatives both in Germany and in the United States, Neuman's book does not really propose a clear way forward. Her book does not challenge the young man in Truro, who thought that the Black Lives Matter movement was an affront to his grandfather's memory. My impression is that it is because she is comparing very different pasts and very different presents. Maybe the Americans should not look up to the Germans, but up to the New Zealanders. The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 1992 demonstrated a shift to represent New Zealand's culturally diverse society and to reach a broader audience. In a partnership between Tangata Whenua (Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand) and Tangata Tiriti (people in New Zealand by right of the Treaty of Waitangi), the museum now tries to represent and appeal to New Zealand's increasingly diverse society, to be a place for discussion, debate, involvement, and celebration, and to link the past, present, and future.

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