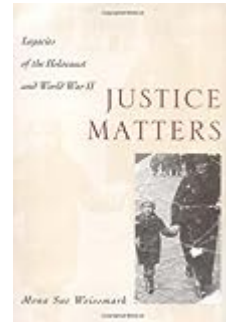


Mona Sue Weissmark. *Justice Matters: Legacies of the Holocaust and World War II.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. viii +191 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-515757-4.



Reviewed by Dennis Klein (Kean University)

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The Here and Now, and the There and Then

Justice Matters is an impressive study for what it says, but one that is flawed by what it does not. It might be the problem of two disciplinary perspectives in tension—the author’s (psychology) and mine (history)—that leads me to this conclusion. Mona Sue Weissmark is interested in the dynamics of conflict resolution and uses a social laboratory setting to observe a redemptive “transformation” among its participants. The setting was a four-day conference in 1992 at Harvard that brought together the grown children of Nazis and Holocaust survivors. This kind of workshop was not uncommon then; I, myself, organized one at the Anti-Defamation League, and the results are, indeed, cathartic (the term I prefer).

Weissmark possesses a penchant for discerning implications. What is at stake is the question of “justice,” and here she truly reaches a pinnacle of insight. As a social construct (vis-À-vis a philosophical or legal standard), justice, she writes, is a matter of settling scores, of avenging rendered abuses: “One possible intent underlying revenge is the desire to ‘balance the scales,’ ‘get even,’ ‘get blood for blood’ or ‘an eye for an eye’” (pp. 43-44). This is the perspective constituting the legacies

of the Holocaust (for survivors’ children) and World War II (for Nazis’ children, who feel victimized for what they regard as wholesale blame). But for Weissmark, this kind of justice is cruel: “Seeking justice can turn into an escalatory, self-perpetuating dynamic” (p. 167).

The story of the search for justice in this volume is partly a personal story. Weissmark recalls the stories her mother told her about her own and her family’s grim life and death in Nazi concentration camps. They disturbed her for the obvious reasons, but also because the burden of this past never went away. She acquired a taste for resentment and revenge for Germans (their conflation with Nazis was significant) that struck her as self-defeating, a price evidently not worth paying.

As she recounts, two investigations of the early 1960s compelled her to rethink this sense of “simple justice”: Hannah Arendt’s *A Report on the Banality of Evil: Eichmann in Jerusalem*; and Stanley Milgram’s experiments, and the book he wrote about them in 1974, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. Both challenged conventional justice’s underlying premise that one side of the moral equation is not just right, but righteous, while

the other side is not just wrong, but hopelessly evil. Or, as her mother saw it, Germans are bad, Jews are good, and both peoples are fundamentally opposites of each other. Arendt showed that perpetrators were really quite ordinary, law-abiding citizens serving their country at war. Nor, Arendt claimed, are victims immune from what she called "moral collapse." Indeed, as Milgram observed, in a moral environment that champions obedience to legitimate authority, good people can commit terrible deeds. These studies suggested to Weissmark an escape from her past, for all people, it appeared, possessing the potential for good and bad behavior, could and should look again at their opposites in a new appreciation for their common humanity.

In the service of defining and exercising a new conception of justice, Weissmark proposes another strategy for loosening the past's grip. She observes that justice, conventionally conceived, is a matter of ethnic identification even more than a matter of right and wrong (p. 48). Individuals seek to redress wrongs in order to protect the integrity of the group they belong to, and she attributes this conviction to stories transmitted from one generation to another. Revenge strengthens the group or the family as much as it restores the moral balance. Hence, the self-perpetuating convictions that Jews can trust only Jews, and certainly not Germans; and that Germans deserve a better reputation, since during the war they sought only the best for Germany and suffered, more or less like others, from wartime devastation and postwar occupation.

This is dicey territory, of course. Weissmark's desire to deflect the competing claims to a moral high ground in order to restore "equal moral relations" certainly sounds like an argument for moral equivalence between the calamities in recent German and Jewish history (pp. 13, 156, 176). But she does not draw this dreadful conclusion: "Establishing a new relationship does not mean there should be an assessment of guilt or responsibility. It does not mean to bury the past or to forgive" (p. 162). Readers of H-German might see a resemblance in Weissmark's argument to Jörg Friedrich's and W. G. Sebald's accounts of the human toll Germans paid in the British RAF offensive bombing campaign. Friedrich's calculated references to German victims not as "Germans" but as men, women, and children amounted to establishing a sort of human equivalence between Jews and Germans without sanitizing the historical record. Weissmark's unfortunate choice of the phrase "equal moral relations" is misleading, for she, too, wants to achieve "normal" relationships between Germans and Jews, based on their common hu-

manity, without jettisoning the historical record and its moral ramifications.

Her goal, then, is to rediscover the human face behind the mask of historical labels or categories—the "here and now" (p. 152) and not what individuals may represent. She modifies the time-worn negotiation with Nazi-era legacies by insisting on "coming to terms with the past and each other" (p. 13), though, in fact, her exclusive concern in this book is with the latter, the present. Her intentions are to "suspend resentments" (p. 65) in order to repair "a shattered relationship" (p. 14).

Her proposals merit considered reflection, but they come across as a bit too saccharine. The children of Nazis and Jewish survivors invariably live both in the here and now and in the there and then, but Weissmark evidently believes they could choose the former over the latter: they could begin to "hear the other side" (pp. 116-17) and validate the others' point of view; imagine each other as individuals who ultimately share common, human doubts and dreams; or adopt a "spirit of make-believe" to help see the other side differently, compassionately. "Justice as compassion," the subject of one chapter that epitomizes her position, is the way out. By replacing revenge and the desire to get even with transcendent compassion, the burden of the past vaporizes and the two sides, once enemies, rediscover each other with renewed strength. "No one ever again should suffer as I did"—a remark her mother once made—is the hallmark of reconciliation based on compassion.

The implications are indeed manifold. Surely we should be able to apply Weissmark's insights to other peoples in historical conflict. In *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (2000), Elazar Barkan, on a broader canvas, examines the post-World War II tendency toward rebuilding instead of punishing nations defeated in war. He observes that in politics pragmatism governed the new ethic of reconciliation, but a desire to move forward in a spirit of goodwill, wrapped in a moral rhetoric, was also important. Weissmark does not consider pragmatic motivations; her argument rests entirely on psycho-dynamics, and here her study founders. Bromides like "understanding each others' hurts and sufferings," "building a sense of self," or "feeling good" by exorcising "the bad [Holocaust] image,"—testimony offered by workshop participants (pp. 153-161)—will provide relief, but not much more. Yet Weissmark, drawing her primary conclusions from the workshop, imagines a new awakening: "Instead of looking back with anger, resentment, and shame, some sur-

vivors' children and Nazis' children shifted toward looking forward in moral determination to prevent future genocide.... They created a legacy of responsibility for the future" (p. 177). Though she acknowledges the simplicity of the statement, she sees new possibilities for creating "a better future" (p. 162) and what she calls a "fraternal society" (p. 177). She does not hesitate to characterize the metamorphosis emerging from compassionate dialogue as a transformation" (p. 119). These observations are overwrought.

When Weissmark weighs and then rejects as ineffec-

tive the "spirit of make-believe," she acknowledges that the past can be intractable. If the views involved "have a strong emotional component, such as beliefs concerning the injustices of the Holocaust," suspending resentments is (to say the least!) difficult (p. 117). In other words, to shake the past clearly is not a matter of will power alone. Whenever views are deep-seated—as they always are in historical conflicts—they will linger and complicate any endeavor to move forward. Compassion is clearly resourceful, but in truly real-world circumstances, it requires substantial strategic support and, even then, can scarcely neutralize the past.

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