

Jan-Holger Kirsch. *Nationaler Mythos oder historische Trauer?: Der Streit um ein zentrales "Holocaust-Mahnmal" für die Berliner Republik.* Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2003. 400 S. EUR 34,00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-412-14002-1.



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The Holocaust Memorial in Berlin was opened on May 10, 2005, almost six years after the German Parliament decided on it. The reader interested in the debates surrounding the memorial—its supporters and detractors, the various forms it took, artistic representations of the memorial—as well as in the politics of constructing a national memorial site for the Holocaust at the German capital will find plenty of reading materials in this thoroughly researched book. (This is a German dissertation, after all, and readers will find a bibliography of more than fifty pages.) As a summation of the debates of the last decades concerning the memorial in Germany, this book is an unqualified success. The hundreds of footnotes alone are worth the price of admission.

But more is at stake here. Kirsch is not happy with the way Germans have dealt with their past. And he might well be right. He attempts to formulate a new counter-narrative. Kirsch demands a more differentiated historical memory for German society. The book is an attempt to explain why Germany needs that kind of memory and why the current narrative is not differentiated enough for the author. It is an attempt to approach the politics of the day through the lens of cultural studies. At the same time, Kirsch develops an ethical view regarding the past. This is first of all a book about “mourning”—not the private, psychological act—but a public form of

“historical mourning.” Historical mourning is for Kirsch first of all an ethical position. However, the pain as actually experienced (or rather, the impossibility of its transference) is not as significant for its sociological relevance. What matters for the theoretical vantage point that Kirsch explores here is how the metaphor of mourning facilitates the appropriation of a cultural status of spectatorship. Focusing on a shift from psychological to social/political/cultural manifestations, Kirsch’s central theoretical question is: how can historical mourning provide us with a toolbox with which to understand the horrors of the Holocaust? In this vein, Kirsch—in the best tradition of cultural studies—moves between the ethical and the empirical and back again. Defining mourning as a cultural phenomenon implies two significant departures from the psychological literature and Kirsch provides the reader with some signposts in order to take these steps: First, mourning is not something that exists naturally; it is something society constructs. In spite of that, Kirsch never leaves any doubt that he is unhappy with actual constructions. In consequence of this view he constantly shifts the language of psychological mourning away from its internalized connotations toward a symbolic and institutional context that is constitutive for collective and moral identifications. Clearly, this is a contested process and the book follows those contestations very closely. The book demonstrates how conflicts over

memory are at the same time conflicts over values and ideas.

The second step is even more complicated: Kirsch seems to be upset that after the war, Germans were not able to include the victims of the Nazi regime into what he calls the "We-Group." But this is wishful thinking, of course. After the Jews were excluded from the *Volksgemeinschaft*, there was and will be no way back. Kirsch is hopeful that for Jews of the second, third or fourth generation and for contemporary Germans, a "group-transcending" mourning might be possible. Fair enough. We may share his hope or we may not. It is this kind of hope that informs the empirical analysis of the book that follows the ethical-theoretical introduction. One the hand, it shows quite clearly how much the whole memorial site in Germany was part of the perpetrators' history. The Jews do not play a part in this. But on the other hand, Kirsch's ethical demand to include the Jews in the process of "historical mourning" completely ignores the gravity of what is being memorialized. There is no basis for common mourning, which only opens up distasteful comparisons between different forms of suffering. This problem also raises the issue of the difference between universal values and particular experiences; the respective balance between these elements informs the extent to which memories and representations of "historical mourning" are politically and culturally consequential. Kirsch pushes this point to its outer limits: nothing less than lost humanity or a break in civilization is at stake here. And this is how he transforms his concept from an individual level to a collective one and counters the criticism of those who believe that mourning is an internal and individualized category.

This introduction to the book by itself is intriguing enough, but much of interest follows. The main part of the book provides the empirical date underlying Kirsch's ethical-theoretical claims. It starts with a chapter summarizing the contestations of memory in Germany during the 1990s. Most interested readers will walk on very familiar terrain here: the exhibition of the crimes of the Wehrmacht; the debates about Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1996); the diaries of Victor Klemperer (1995) and the so-called Bubis-Walser debate (1998). Kirsch does not only summarize these debates, but takes them as opportunity to express his dismay about Germans' inability to mourn.

The next chapters deal with the memorial itself. One chapter deals with discourses surrounding it and another

one with the artistic representations of it. It is striking to see how many newspaper articles dealt with this issue. Kirsch shows very convincingly how these debates were interconnected and created their own universe of discourse. Kirsch suggests, for instance, that the memorial initiative could have failed in 1989-99 if it had not been for Walser's scandalous speech in 1998. This state of affairs reveals the irony of unintended consequences: without Walser's complaint about ordered memory, perhaps the memorial would not have made it. But there is, of course, nothing really ironic about this book. The opposite is the case. It not only analyzes piety as a sociological variable, but it is pious in itself, constantly reminding the innocent and naïve reader what is appropriate and what is not when it comes to memorializing the Jews. It seems that Kirsch claims for himself a meta-position from which historical mourning becomes appropriate, while the subject of his analysis is not appropriately pious about memory. However, the reader is never informed about the origins of this perspective or why Kirsch's position is more appropriate than the one of those he analyzes.

The chapter about the artistic competition is especially fascinating, since it reminds the reader of lost alternatives. Readers have by now seen the Eisenman field of stelae and have formed their opinions. Much has been written about the proper aesthetic representation of the Holocaust. In this chapter, Kirsch reminds the reader what could have been. Kirsch takes the reader on a tour of the missed possibilities, playing the aesthetic and moral judge of the entries. Kirsch wants to be convinced that the entries (including the winner Eisenman) stand up to his criteria of appropriate historical mourning. Most don't.

In the end, Kirsch remains ambivalent about the subject of his research. On the one hand, he seems satisfied that the memory of the Holocaust remains the "raison d'être" for the new German republic. It has moved from the margins to the center. But Kirsch is also conscious of the price of such a development. Memorializing is no challenge anymore; it has become mainstream and mainstreamed. In the end, Kirsch mentions the global connections, but does not really enter the global debates about memorializing. This is a very German book written for a German audience. Kirsch seems to be aware that morality is based on particularity. It is based on identity. It is based on being able to look ourselves in the mirror and say that we have fulfilled the moral obligations that make us who we are. Kirsch believes that Germans have not done this. To ignore all that is to misunderstand the

basis of morality and to sweep all that aside is an attempt to forget who you are—and to free yourself from all personal responsibility. Individuals do not come out of the void, they are produced socially, and they remain rooted in their emotions and ways of thought in the collectivities that produced them. But part of that construction is a Germany and Europe without Jews.

If Kirsch would have explored the broader context of his study he could have strengthened his argument.

Through the book, the absence of Jews is striking. And this is how German memory connects to European memory. It allows it to establish future-oriented forms of memory, against national founding myths and myths of warfare, and for a self-critique of Europe without Jews. And, of course, Germany has gladly joined this process. Those who wish to learn more about Germany's role in the construction of this Europeanized memory may well begin with Kirsch's book.

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