

Forgiveness and Remembrance: Remembering Wrongdoing in Personal and Public Life. By Jeffrey M. Blustein. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. viii + 344. \$24.95 paper.

The record of terror victims' remembrance is surely grim. How could it be otherwise? Legal trials expose crimes, commemorations and memorials recall ruptures, truth commissions field confessions, museums and archives collect and preserve the evidence. Though Blustein does not specifically consider memoirs, they, too, are graphic. One of the most significant accounts is a series of essays by Jean Améry brought together in the volume *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (Indiana University Press, 1980). It is widely regarded as an archetypal articulation of resentment. Améry reviles his torturers for their "radical negation of the other" [35] and his contemporaries for their heartless indifference.

What then do we make of the occasional, surprising volte-face? For most scholars, very little. Even Améry rejects the option of looking forward: It would efface the duty of witnesses to expose past wrongs. It would abet forgetfulness and defeat the task of remembrance. As he observed, "Resentment blocks...the future." [68] And yet, he writes about "euphoric moments" [39] and then the "wish to live together as fellow human beings"[xiv].

Jeffrey M. Blustein's new book is a philosophical tour de force that finally makes sense of these kind of contradictions that frequently occurs in accounts of conflicts and atrocities. He argues that blame and expectation can coexist in the text and in public commemorations. Standard analyses that describe witnesses' emotions triggered by memories of wrongdoing refer only or primarily to anger and resentment. Améry, we should note, helped to set the stage. As he wrote, "I speak as a victim and examine my resentments" [63], but on examination of the text, he is rather expressing something that is closer to betrayal and less intransigent: Confronting his torturers, he wrote about an "expectation of help, the certainty of help" [28] which he had come to recognize as "naïve" but not as bankrupt, for he saw his "fellow-man" in the "counter-man." The distinction between anger and betrayal (Blustein calls it "disappointment") is crucial. The former – resentment, which Blustein calls "retribution" – categorically blocks the future; it is retaliatory. The latter permits it.

The implications of Blustein's argument for transitional societies are significant. As scholarship comes to recognize the pivotal roles that individuals and civil society play in the process, his brief for the real possibilities of forgiveness is noteworthy. Forgiveness as a feature of reconciliation is customarily presumed as soft or idealistic. Who is able to erase feelings of anger—to "wipe the slate clean," as Blustein writes—and foreswear the impulse to blame in order to promote social harmony? That, of course, is a view that Desmond Tutu championed, which Blustein rejects. Take another look, he asserts. Those who are wronged also feel deep sadness, grief, and hurt, as well as disappointment. In these "non-retributive" expressions reside the seeds of a formidable forgiveness.

But what is forgiveness? For Blustein, it is not just a disposition to connect with wrongdoers. Nor is it a gift that releases wrongdoers from accountability for their wrongdoing as Hannah Arendt, an early interpreter in the post-World War II era, understood it.¹ It is not even constituent of reconciliation, if reconciliation implies healing or closure; that is, a return to the status quo ante. Hurt persists. Blaming is demanding. Forgiveness, grounded in reality, can never restore broken relationships as if the violations could be forgotten or, as Nietzsche asserted, should be forgotten as a mark of noble character. For Blustein, blame, or what he calls moral “protest,” far from being something to avoid, is vital to acts of forgiveness. It confers self-respect, or agency, on those who were wronged; it transforms them from victims into players, indeed equal players in the process of social transitions. If forgiveness stands a chance of moving forward, it must also look backward to the wrongdoing itself.

Blustein’s analysis does not contravene Arendt altogether. Agency is the key for both, or as Arendt asserted (1958), a state of exertion or “action” that “interrupts the inexorable, automatic course of daily life.” But there is no considered looking backward for her. “Beginning something new” is for her the sine qua non of forgiveness. For Blustein, what forgiveness accomplishes is a revision of relationships with wrongdoers. Indeed, this is a critical part of Blustein’s investigation. He writes that if forgiveness restores anything, it is an “equilibrium among all parties” [92], though, as he elaborates, it is really a new equilibrium that can accommodate memories as long as they are non-retributive and, therefore, less disruptive than retributive memories and more manageable. Those who were violated arrive at a different place in the negotiation: They are more cautious or alert than before the violation. Instead of something new, they expect something different, indeed something more, from the wrongdoer.

All this, as Blustein observes in his chapters on public commemorations, is a result of a process (that is, transitions), culminating in public expression. Just as individuals, in their reflections, evaluate and regulate their raw emotions of retribution, rituals of commemoration moderate, or discipline, disruptive impulses to retaliate and permit non-retributive and even positive emotions to govern the revision of relationships with wrongdoers. As public events, they also promote a post-conflict social order, for commemorations are acts of remembering together, with others, and often with the other. This is also true for personal accounts. Memoirists also imagine an audience. They are writing not to or for others, but with others. As Améry wrote in the preface to his *At the Mind’s Limits*, “To the extent that the reader would venture to join me at all he would have no choice but to accompany me, in the same tempo, through the darkness that I illuminated step by step.” [xiv] It is the very act of writing, as I wrote elsewhere, that “manifests an underlying wish to reconnect with world and to parry a devastating sense of loneliness.” (Klein 2011)

As a historian, I wish Blustein would have developed some of his suggestive observations. Particularly freighted is his reference to the role of relationships prior to the wrongdoing in negotiating the terms of the new equilibrium. Indeed, the vitality of non-retributive emotions that make forgiveness tenable is, I believe, influenced, if not conditioned, by pre-traumatic circumstances. Especially in regions in which pre-conflict,

inter-ethnic penetration predominated (Chile, former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Eastern Europe, etc.), relationships before the rupture set the stage for pliable transitions or, as some scholars prefer, post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004; Saul 2014). Historians and other scholars debate the question of the quality of these historical relations; that is, how “intimate” they were (Bartov 2013; Hoffman 1997). Blustein uses the term “love,” but, in historical contexts, pre-conflict relationships were fraught, not least because those who were wronged often expected more from their neighbors than the actual circumstances warranted. Still, Blustein is on to something. Survivors of the Holocaust, because of their pre-conflict emotional attachments, often write about the “recognition” of their assailants as neighbors and it is in this frame of mind that they could write at all, much less write with conviction about a future.

This book answers many questions about why those who were wronged can participate in, if not inspire, transitions to stable post-conflict conditions. Importantly, their decision to present their stories for public consideration signals a desire to overcome their initial inclinations to withdraw from the world and recalibrate their worldly relationships, but, as Blustein influentially argues, not without asserting moral protest. By theorizing forgiveness, he also makes clear that many survivors are, in fact, forgiving their enemies even if they refused to articulate the word (as they, like Arendt, understood it). As non-retributive emotions eventually eclipse retributive ones, those who were wronged can look forward with chastened expectation disciplined by deeply etched suspicion.

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ⁱ In promoting forgiveness, Arendt distinguishes between “trespasses” and crimes that are “radically evil” (239-41). Though she exempts the latter from her argument, she effectively ratified the standard account that regards forgiveness as a release (though not necessarily an exoneration) from the consequences of wrongdoing even in cases of extreme situations.

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, 246, 177.

Omer Bartov, “Communal Genocide: Personal Accounts of the Destruction of Buczacz, Eastern Galicia, 1941–1944,” in *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian and Ottoman Borderlands*, eds. Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, 399-420

Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.)

Dennis Klein “Resentment and Recognition: Toward a New Conception of Humanity in Améry’s *At the Mind’s Limits*,” in *On Jean Améry: Philosophy of Catastrophe*, ed. Magdalena Zolkos, New York: Lexington Books, 2011, 95)

Jack Saul, *Collective Trauma and Collective Healing*, New York: Routledge, 2014, 9)

R.G. Tedeschi and L.G. Calhoun, “Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence,” *Psychological Inquiry*, 15, no. 1 [2004], 1-18.