

## **Book Review: Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur: Eine Intervention**

*Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur: Eine Intervention.*

By Aleida Assmann.

Munich: C.H. Beck, 2013. Pp. 231. €16,95

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The moment is significant: 70 years after the end of World War II, 94-year old Oskar Gröning stands trial in Lüneburg, Germany, for the crimes he committed as a soldier with the SS. Convicted on July 15, 2015 for accessory to 300,000 counts of murder at the former concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, Gröning is one of few remaining witnesses. His memories have historical value, and carry moral and judicial weight.

I begin this book review with a reference to Oskar Gröning's trial because the event crystallizes the discontent Germans have long expressed over their national memory culture (*Erinnerungskultur*). Unlike the leading Nazi war criminals at the Auschwitz trial, who pleaded, without exception, not guilty to the charges brought against them, Gröning has admitted moral guilt. While recognizing his complicity in the Holocaust, he has, however, refused a direct apology to the survivors present in the courtroom.

Gröning's performance goes to the heart of the matter of Aleida Assmann's 2013 book, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur: Eine Intervention*. In this account of German memory culture post-WWII, the author identifies the tension between individual and cultural memory of the Holocaust that lies at the root of German discontent (*Unbehagen*) with its national past. We see this *Unbehagen* reflected in Gröning's admission of guilt as well, which is a direct response to the guilt discourse of the 1968-generation and its call for breaking the communicative silence regarding the Holocaust.

The cultural expectations surrounding this discourse variously implied acknowledgement of a negative heritage (p. 66), the use of normative language (or "political correctness," p. 81), and a moralizing stance (p. 92). In overcoming the refusal to speak about his role in past crimes, Gröning embraced the German guilt discourse: His is not a confession of personal culpability, but a reflexive insinuation of collective guilt, a sin that all Germans share. On the individual level, a profound silence remains, effacing both judicial responsibility and political accountability.

In this sense, Gröning's act is one of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* par excellence. Not only is his recollection of the Nazi past self-referential, his remembrance also remains incomplete and distanced. The goal of speaking about the past is here not so much an accounting for or coping with the past, as common dictionary translations of the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* suggest; rather, his is an attempt to resolve the past by moving beyond the "traumatic gap" (p. 41) left behind by the Holocaust.

Against such formulaic and partial remembrance, Assmann offers perspectives for a critical counter-memory centered not on practices of overcoming the past, but of

retaining it, that is, *Vergangenheitsbewahrung*. This implies two shifts: First, it entails an emphasis on memory in historical narratives. Eyewitness accounts, testimonies, biographical accounts, and memoirs are the stuff that breathes life into history by providing emotional access, meaning, and perspective. Second, given more recent political developments—the end of the Cold War, German reunification, and the emergence of transnational networks of Holocaust remembrance—German memory culture no longer exists in isolation.

This broader perspective allows the author to outline possible strategies for interventions in memory culture, which she calls for in her book's subtitle. For Assmann, *Intervention* first and foremost implies disrupting the self-referentiality of German memory culture by drawing attention to the existence of other memory discourses. Centered on a politics of recognition (*Politik der Anerkennung*, p. 171), she asks us to develop sensibilities for different historical traumas and to engage in a dialogic form of memory.

Dialogue does not imply comparison of historical wrongs, however. Assmann, drawing on the work of historian Bernd Faulenbach, explicitly rejects attempts at ranking victimhood, which bear the risk of relativizing and trivializing traumatic memories. Rather than prescribing some memories as valid and rejecting others as invalid, a politics of recognition provides room for disagreement and discrepancies in the recollection of past experiences. Engaging with others' memories has the potential of exposing the manifold layers of silenced, unremembered, or forgotten aspects of painful histories—those historical wounds (*historische Wunden*, p. 168) left behind by the exploitative regimes of genocide, colonialism, and, I would add, capitalism.

Much has been contributed to a politics of recognition by bottom-up or grassroots memory initiatives, a topic Assmann addresses all too briefly. Instead, she foregrounds the role of national institutions (such as schools, museums, archives, libraries, memorials, etc.) in German memory culture. Yet, over the past few decades, an increasing number of local memory projects have sprung up all across Germany, which offer alternative ways of remembering the past that oppose national memory from below.

One such project is the well-known documentation center “Topography of Terror,” located at the former headquarters of the Secret State Police, the SS, and the Reich Security Main Office in Berlin. Less known is the story of the grassroots political group called “Active Museum of Fascism and Resistance,” which began unofficial archaeological excavations at the site in 1985. It was this group's efforts that eventually lead to formal recognition and memorialization of the site.

While such initiatives from below may tap into established historical narratives, their emergence from civil society highlights the experiential and dialogic dimension of cultural memory. That is to say, history work is here not a call to remember for memory's sake, but for an ethical form of memory (*ethische Erinnerung*, p. 66). Sites like the “Topography of Terror” serve as spatial referents for empathy and solidarity with the victims of oppressive political regimes, and they manifest a political imperative—that

history should not repeat itself (“Erinnern, um nicht zu wiederholen,” p. 66). Grounded in the past, such critical memory culture is undeniably future-oriented.

Considering this, Gröning’s case is significant in yet another way. His trial, believed by some to be “the last Auschwitz trial on earth” (New York Times, 1 July 2015), highlights how German memory culture is subject to change. Today, few surviving victims remain to share their experiences and memories, and at times I fear that remembrance will lose its immediacy. Yet, Assmann shows that Gröning’s trial is not the end of memory. Rather, as history moves forward, the question is not *what* to remember, but *how* to recollect and preserve a past that is no longer grounded in living memory.

What is more, because memory is always produced in the present, the question of remembrance is inevitably tied to the issue of how our own times will be recalled in the future. During the Night of Broken Glass in 1938, a father told his daughter to turn away, to not pay witness, lest she might be held accountable in the future, because “Das wird man uns nicht vergessen” (This they will not forget/forgive us) (p. 47). I take Assmann’s call for an intervention as a reminder to us—a plea not to look away, but to witness and to remember. I think of Solingen and of the National-Socialist Underground in Germany, but I also recall Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, Wounded Knee and Vietnam. Today, I am a witness. If I don’t speak out, I will one day find that I have been complicit.