

Issue 51, 28 July, 2017

## “A New Enlightenment”, or: Cosmopolitan Memory Yet Again.

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### Abstract:

Baer and Sznajder’s volume *Memory and Forgetting in the Post-Holocaust Era: The Ethics of Never Again* furthers memory studies’ global and transnational turn. Its three case studies of post-dictatorial societies focus on memory’s role in democratic transition in Argentina, Spain, and Eastern Europe. These chapters come between broader essays on the “ethics of Never Again” and “sociology of hope”. The authors present Holocaust memory as the universal foundation of human rights, while exploring its complex entanglements with particular, often nationally-bound, memories of victimhood. Unlikely to appeal to readers unfamiliar with debates over cosmopolitan memory, the book’s essayistic elements could stimulate further critical discussion on relations of memory, history, ethics, and the global among the informed.

### How to cite:

Vickers, Paul: “A New Enlightenment’, or: Cosmopolitan Memory Yet Again. [Review on: Baer, Alejandro and Natan Sznajder: *Memory and Forgetting in the Post-Holocaust Era: The Ethics of Never Again*. London/ New York: Routledge, 2017.]”. In: KULT\_online 51 (2017).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2017.152>



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Baer, Alejandro and Natan Sznaider: *Memory and Forgetting in the Post-Holocaust Era: The Ethics of Never Again*. London/ New York: Routledge, 2017. 173 pages. 110 GBP. ISBN: 9781427448941.

### Abstract:

Baer and Sznaider’s volume *Memory and Forgetting in the Post-Holocaust Era: The Ethics of Never Again* furthers memory studies’ global and transnational turn. Its three case studies of post-dictatorial societies focus on memory’s role in democratic transition in Argentina, Spain, and Eastern Europe. These chapters come between broader essays on the “ethics of Never Again” and “sociology of hope”. The authors present Holocaust memory as the universal foundation of human rights, while exploring its complex entanglements with particular, often nationally-bound, memories of victimhood. Unlikely to appeal to readers unfamiliar with debates over cosmopolitan memory, the book’s essayistic elements could stimulate further critical discussion on relations of memory, history, ethics, and the global among the informed.

Alejandro Baer and Natan Sznaider’s compact yet wide-ranging study furthers memory studies’ global and transnational turn. Tracing encounters with “transnational memory structures” (p. 128) in Argentina, Spain, and Eastern Europe, they frame the Holocaust as paradigmatic of global, ‘cosmopolitan memory’, a concept Sznaider developed with Daniel Levy (Levy, Sznaider: *Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter: Der Holocaust*. Frankfurt a. M. 2001) capable of engendering “transnational solidarities” (p. 133). *Memory and Forgetting* “seeks to bring universalism and particularism together” (p. 148) by highlighting multiple uses of the past in preventing future violence in three post-dictatorships. Human rights, “the last utopia standing” (p. 5) after the horrors of World War II, they argue, are built on memory, principally of the Holocaust, “the paradigmatic Never Again from which all other ‘never agains’ in the plural derive” (p. 11). Memory, underpinning ‘the ethics of Never Again’, protects this utopian outpost. As “the universal dimension of contemporary hope” (p. 26), it lays foundations for the “sociology of hope” (p. 147) and “a new Enlightenment” (p. 149).

The concise, focused chapters on Argentina and Spain contrast with the less coherent study of a homogenized Eastern Europe, ranging from Bosnia and Croatia to Poland and Ukraine. For Argentina, Baer and Sznajder address the fate of the ‘Disappeared’ under the military dictatorship of 1976-83. The first official report referenced the original “Never Again” (p. 30), the inscription from Dachau. With material traces scarce, testimony was crucial to civil society activists’ campaign for recognition. They became “global political icons of Never Again”, celebrated by U2 and Sting (p. 33), mirroring Holocaust memory’s mediation of “universal lessons” (p. 50) through mass culture. While theories and practices of Holocaust memory successfully travelled to Argentina, so did accompanying notions of victims’ pure, depoliticized innocence and “martyrdom” (p. 58). By declaring the ‘Disappeared’ genocide victims (without reference to international law), Argentina reached “the most complete stage of the adoption of an ethics of Never Again” (p. 42). An “entire society” identified not only with but also as victims (p. 57). ‘Never Again’ proves ambivalent, instrumentalizing the universal and transnational to legitimize particularism and national mythology.

In Spain, a generationally-inspired turn around 2000 broke the pact of oblivion and silence necessary in democratic transition (pp. 64-65). Younger “memorialists” (p. 64) questioned parents’ silence over grandparents’ suffering, applying Holocaust-inspired ‘Never Again’ rather than the politicized antifascist paradigm, forging entirely innocent victims. This move, alongside exhumations, was necessary to “make them a citizen of the future, recognized as a full human being and citizen, a member of the present political community” (p. 78): the transnational, European community enabling Spain to overcome its “internal paradox” of civil-war divisions (p. 97). Memory again required ambivalent forgetting.

The shortest empirical chapter covers most ground, the exceptional Eastern Europe space that faced both German and Soviet totalitarianism and where the Jewish genocide was conducted, rather than experienced later through mediations. Tending to homogenize the region as the universal cosmopolitan memory culture’s other, the authors underplay particularities. Baer and Sznajder restate the familiar argument that the “Eastern-bloc” gained its “entry ticket to Europe” through Holocaust remembrance. But, they add, the countries only paid “lip service to existing international frameworks, while in reality their actual memory work lay entirely in the realm of communist terror” (p. 111). Usually vague, demanding familiarity with existing literature, in critiquing existing work (e.g. page 4 where ‘some researchers’ and ‘others’, unnamed and unreferenced, represent crucial contrasting positions), here the authors explicitly declare Timothy Snyder and Aleida Assmann insufficiently “Holocaust-centred” (p. 111). Instead, they supposedly adhere to the “double genocide” (p. 122) (rather than the weaker double totalitarianism) theory.

Assmann and Snyder's "competitive" model of relations of Holocaust memory and "memories of Stalinist atrocities" is said to enable concealment of "collaboration of national units in the Jewish genocide" (p. 111). This claim underplays the depth of the researchers' arguments on intersections of multiple experiences of violence, as well as Holocaust and genocide studies' turn away from declaring the Shoah incomparable and thus beyond understanding. The idea of "memory not as zero-sum but as sum-sum (or multi-directional [*sic - PV*] in the words of Michael Rothberg)" (p. 111) inspires the "sociology of hope", whereby empathy for others' suffering can engender external solidarity with one's own group's victimhood. Still, civil society and official debates in Poland over Jan Gross' revelations about Poles' role in massacring Jews in Jedwabne in July 1941 (*Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland, 1941*. Princeton 2002) are for Baer and Sznajder an exception confirming the rule that Eastern Europe is outside the "universal" Never Again framework. It lacks "guilt and responsibility that would make up cosmopolitan transnational consciousness" (p. 112).

The Eastern Europe chapter ends with genuinely thought-provoking questions, including: "Do we need material evidence to establish the truth since we do not trust testimony?" (p. 128). All three case studies address exhumations, suggesting a common 'forensic turn', but the concluding fifth chapter avoids engaging with the stimulating questions, beyond reaffirming testimony's value for a "memory of hope" (p. 132): "Telling stories about people's lives prevents the search for abstract theory, which was characteristic of sociology for such a long time." (p.149) Cosmopolitan memory, which presumably is no abstract theory, requires listeners open to "particularity" and the "standpoint of others without giving up our own" (p. 149). The final chapter does offer an extended rereading of *Antigone* (pp. 134-42), with Haemon epitomizing "democratic argument", recognizing "local conditions", while mediating "global-universal-transitional justice projects" to ensure "the best outcome possible at a given time and in light of available resources" (p. 138). Haemon pragmatically accepts forgetting and remembering in pursuing peace, stemming vengeance and protecting human rights. His suicide, a neat metaphor for the self-sacrifice empathetic cosmopolitan memory demands, is largely overlooked.

*Memory and Forgetting* demonstrates uncompromising faith that cosmopolitan memory is today the best outcome possible globally, as its ethics of 'Never Again' offers "moral certainty" (p. 8), even if it means "the world is divided into innocent victims and evil perpetrators. Such clear-cut binaries play a key role in the ethics of Never Again and shape memory narratives across the globe" (p. 11). Baer and Sznajder's book points to the ambivalent, possibly exclusivist, outcomes this engenders, but do not develop this critical potential. They are not aiming for a fully-referenced entangled history of 'Never Again' tropes. Their work is principally an extended essay attempting to reaffirm faith in memory, particularly Holocaust memory, as a universal value. "Memories of past atrocities are the origin of a new Enlightenment and of a cosmopolitan theory striving for post-traditional taboos: the fear of new,

barbaric alternatives” (p. 149). The sociology of hope is rooted in fear: of repeating past violations, certainly; but also of an imagined barbaric other, positioned, like Baer and Sznajder’s Eastern Europe, outside “the new Enlightenment”.

Timothy Snyder argued in *Bloodlands* that “[o]ur contemporary culture of commemoration takes for granted that memory prevents murder. If people died in such large numbers, it is tempting to think they must have died for something of transcendent value, which can be revealed, developed, and preserved in the right sort of political remembrance. The transcendent then turns out to be the national” (Timothy Snyder: *Bloodlands. Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. London 2010, pp. 401-402). Baer and Sznajder rework the template of martyrological nationalist memory, outlined critically by Snyder, upscaling the cosmopolitan, transnational realm of human rights to the transcendent. NGOs and global organizations underwrite the ethics of ‘Never Again’, producing a “universalist minimum” of “substantive norms” where slavery, torture, and genocide are taboo and freedom of speech is sacrosanct (p. 148). Yet, as the authors note, ours is an age of violence “constantly mediated by direct access to the sight of suffering across the world” (p. 8).

Sociologists, memory scholars and activists can hope past violations never again occur in the future. Their abstract models, accompanied by selective yet wide-ranging case studies, can reaffirm this hope. But we cannot forget that human rights are being violated today. Whether transnational, cosmopolitan, apolitical, state-sanctioned, or otherwise, no amount of memory or testimony is preventing present-day violence. We might ask whether it is ethical to believe it can.

**German Abstract:**

**“Eine neue Aufklärung“, oder: Erneut zum kosmopolitischen Gedächtnis.**

Das Buch *Memory and Forgetting in the Post-Holocaust Era: The Ethics of Never Again* trägt zur globalen und transnationalen Wende in der kulturellen Erinnerungsforschung bei. Baer und Sznajder stellen Fallstudien zur Rolle der Erinnerung in der Demokratisierung dreier posttotalitarischen Gesellschaften vor. Die empirischen Kapitel zu Argentinien, Spanien und Osteuropa sind von einem Essay zur „ethics of Never Again“ und der „sociology of hope“ flankiert. Einerseits betrachten die Autoren die Erinnerung an den Holocaust als ein universelles Fundament zur Stärkung der Menschenrechte; andererseits versuchen sie die komplexen Beziehungen zu partikularen, oft nationalen, Opfererinnerungen zu konzeptualisieren. Gleichwohl wenig zugänglich für Leser, denen die Debatten zum kosmopolitischen Gedächtnis unbekannt sind, können die essayistischen Teile des Buches für vorab Gebildete Anreize zur kritischen Auseinandersetzung mit den Verflechtungen von Erinnerung, Geschichte, Ethik und dem Globalen bieten.

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