



LJMU Research Online

McGowan, W

In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies by David Rieff

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/13065/>

Article

Citation (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

McGowan, W (2017) In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies by David Rieff. The British Journal of Criminology: an international review of crime and society, 57 (6). pp. 1520-1523. ISSN 0007-0955

LJMU has developed **LJMU Research Online** for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/>

Book Review

In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies. By David Rieff (Yale University Press, 2016, \$25.00/Yale University Press, £14.99, 160pp.)

In Praise of Forgetting is a provocative essay by American journalist, policy analyst and former war correspondent David Rieff, whose insights are drawn partly from his first-hand experience of reporting on conflicts in Africa, the Balkans and Central Asia. It is the latest book contribution from Rieff, who has written extensively on matters concerning (though not limited to) international conflict, mass violence and humanitarianism for numerous renowned newspapers and magazines in America, France and Spain. In recent years he has also turned his intellectual attention to writing about poverty and hunger, as well as authoring a deeply personal memoir about the death of his mother, Susan Sontag. This eclectic oeuvre is contextually important for newcomers to Rieff's work, particularly so for more specialized scholars of 'collective memory', 'trauma', 'war' and 'remembrance' working within academia who may, unlike Rieff, adhere to comparatively more stringent disciplinary boundaries. The intellectual freedom with which Rieff writes is impressive, in terms of *In Praise of Forgetting's* ambitious scope, but is also central to the author's contrarian and, at times, polemic style which, I suspect, is likely to alienate as many social science readers as it will enamour. Rather than getting too side-tracked by issues concerning style (after all, the most palatable of literary styles can obviously yield specious arguments and vice versa), I will try to provide a brief overview of the book's central thesis and consider some of its strengths and limitations.

Rieff's chief aim is to challenge the ubiquity of 'collective memory as a moral and social imperative' (p. 58), for him symptomatic of George Santayana's famous and celebrated (but 'demonstrably false') aphorism: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it' (p. 58). Rieff argues that not only is collective memory of past suffering no proven antidote against present conflict—it is frequently shaped, harnessed and invoked in ways which actively fuel it. Without paying faithful attention to the specific conditions under which mass violence has occurred does an injustice, Rieff argues, to both the past and the present; in this sense, and apparently distinct from the 'Never Again' mantra (a moot assertion for what is in reality a broad church of thought), one of the most important lessons histories of violence teach us is that we never repeat the past in the same way even if there are tragic parallels: 'Auschwitz did not inoculate us against East Pakistan in 1971, or East Pakistan against Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, or Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge against Hutu Power in Rwanda in 1994' (pp. 83–4). Through countless historical examples, Rieff argues that when collective memory elevates remembrance to the status of the sacred (an explicit, if 'unexceptional sentiment' of the 9/11 memorial's mission statement (p. 127)), historical accuracy is often compromised and, in some cases, remembering may actually prove to be morally ruinous. 'These are the cases', writes Rieff invoking utilitarian terms, 'small in number, no doubt, but high in the potential for human suffering, in which it is possible that whereas forgetting does an injustice to the past, remembering does an injustice to the present'. (p. 121). This leads him to the conclusion that under certain social and political conditions we might find ourselves on surer ethical footing if we were to adopt something akin to Nietzsche's 'active forgetting' (p. 143).

Rieff rightly highlights that memory has come to assume undeniable prominence, particularly morally, in contemporary discussions of conflict and political violence. His scepticism towards the vacuous truism that memory is simply ‘socially constructed’ (p. 23) is shared by philosopher Ian Hacking (1995), whose brilliant *Rewriting the Soul* points to some of the tangible ways in which the new science of memory which came into being in the late 19th century increasingly wrested knowledge from the religious, spiritual or transcendental realms in the 20th. Making reference to his late father, sociologist Philip Rieff and his well-known work *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Rieff does not totally deny the healing potential of individual therapeutic interventions but rather laments the application of their logic to social groups or nations acting on their collective traumas (pp. 105–6). Rieff’s concern—that channelling memories of past violence in order to prospectively ‘imagine otherwise’ often leads to de-historicized accounts leached of their specificity (p. 119)—also chimes with Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman’s (2009) anthropological analysis of trauma. Offered in a different but related context, their cautionary note about how trauma obliterates experience by subsuming a diversity of phenomena under an umbrella term, reducing complex and varied experiences to medical symptoms and predefined representation (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 281), explores the moral economy of contemporary victimhood and the claims-making this entails.

Rieff’s account similarly forces us to think through historical and political claims-making in relation to representations and mobilizations of past violence, though his rejection of our propensity to violate the historical record is more palpable. Drawing on historian Tony Judt, Rieff argues that when the past is combed opportunistically for ‘political profit’ the result is both bad morality and bad history (p. 80). Ironically, the book is so packed with historical examples spanning such wide-ranging periods that, inevitably, a degree of specificity and depth is perhaps lost. The comparative insightfulness of discussing such disparate topics as the Battle of Hastings, the Armenian genocide, the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, Pinochet’s Chile, the Nazi Holocaust, Québec’s Quiet Revolution, 9/11, the 1916 Easter Rising, among countless others within the book’s few pages, is certainly ambitious and mostly justified but occasionally feels somewhat dizzying. At times, Rieff is so keen to attack the moral authority garnered by collective memory that he is arguably inattentive to the various forms it takes and the complex relationship between individual and collective consciousness. Here he is unequivocal: ‘Quite simply, the world does not have memories; nor do nations; nor do groups of people. Individuals remember, full stop’ (p. 54). Moreover, while history may not be a menu (p. 40) its study remains an interpretive and contested endeavour which interacts dynamically with time, whether for establishing scholarly records or legal adjudication. Rieff is clearly well aware of this complexity despite insisting that we adhere strictly to the historical record (‘the verifiable one, not the mythopoeic one’ (p. 36)) which gives rise to a subtle yet regular stream of conditional caveats to the possibility of forgetting. For example, he states (pp. 87–8): ‘Nor do I suggest that, even if I am right about the uses of such forgetting, it should take place in the immediate aftermath of a great crime or while its perpetrators are still at large. Leaving the needs of history aside, these are moments when commonsense morality and the minimal requirements of justice weigh strongly in favour of remembrance’. But what is commonsense morality and who gets to decide what form ‘forgetting’ should take? Debates in this regard, including between settler and dispossessed communities, domestic law enforcement agencies and the citizenry they are supposed to serve and protect, successive governments, international jurisdictions and so on, surely have the propensity to usher in both physically and symbolically

violent conflict whether they concern practices of remembrance or efforts to ‘forget’, or indeed whether perpetrators are still at large.

There are no easy answers and Rieff does not pretend to offer any. For the most part his thesis is ‘a thought experiment’ (p. 16; p. 102) in what might, or might not, have happened if collective efforts to remember had played out differently. This leads to a number of related lines of inquiry for Rieff and the book’s eight chapters can be read as standalone ruminations. The first and last chapters, ‘Footprints in the Sands of Time, and All That’ and ‘Against Remembrance’, tie the essay’s main themes together well. A moot aspect of these chapters, however, is Rieff’s repeated tendency to question remembrance practices largely based on the self-evident fact that ‘sooner or later every human accomplishment, like every human being, will be forgotten’ (p. 5). An awareness of the impermanence of the social world, including states, systems, national identities and so on, is a useful counterpoint to universal appeals to remembrance but risks tipping over into unhelpful nihilism at times. More important and valuable is Rieff’s consideration, particularly in Chapter 5, of the distinction between justice (as requiring memory) and peace (as requiring its absence). Although this is a relatively well-trodden path among scholars of international relations, political theory and within transitional justice literatures (see, e.g., Hellmann 2013), it is Rieff’s interspersed anecdotes from his experiences as a war correspondent which best highlight the real complexity which haunts unequivocal calls for justice. Addressing criticisms from human rights lobbyists around the impunity enjoyed by Slobodan Milošević following the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement until his eventual indictment for war crimes, Rieff writes: ‘And the human rights establishment was correct: it *was* an unjust settlement. But for many of us, who, whether as aid workers or journalists, had seen the horror of the Balkan wars at first hand, almost any peace, no matter how unfair, was infinitely preferable to the seemingly endless infliction of death, suffering, and humiliation’ (pp. 90–1). Similar tensions can be identified in relation to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland and the release of political prisoners. While some victims still speak of their frustration or bafflement at former perpetrators ‘walking free’, others accept it as part of a necessary peace settlement. In many ways the dichotomy between justice and peace is, of course, too simplistic for both traditionally Catholic and Protestant and/or republican and loyalist communities living in Northern Ireland suffering the effects wrought by decades of neo-liberalism and deindustrialization. Nonetheless, there are a range of justice struggles we could usefully consider alongside the claim that ‘peace and justice can sometimes be inimical to each other’ (p. 91), particularly in relation to cases of genocide and their cultural representation which has attracted increased criminological attention in recent years (see Brown and Rafter 2013).

Rieff’s discussion of the dialectical relationship between history and memory, positing that collective memory functions to morally permit a kind of dictatorial nostalgia (p. 93), is painfully insightful in the current conjuncture. Appeals to ‘Make [insert postcolonial superpower] Great Again’ are perhaps the most obvious and contemporarily resonant example of this since the book’s publication. Taking a broader view of remembrance than one confined to formally endorsed symbols and rituals, such as commemoration ceremonies, museums, statues, monuments and physical insignia, all of which also feature in the book, it is arguably this more generalized nostalgia which struck the loudest chord in the wake of Brexit and the 2016 US Presidential election. In an age when fascism and racist populism continue to threaten human rights in the United States, Europe and beyond, the role played by remembrance and

commemoration in their collective form must be respectfully scrutinized. *In Praise of Forgetting*'s originality lies in its relentless interdisciplinarity and fast-moving pace, drawing as it does so interchangeably on works of history, philosophy, sociology, literary fiction and poetry, and political science, flitting often seamlessly between historical and contemporary issues. There are no doubt scholars specializing in any one of the conflicts or disciplines Rieff utilizes, who may find such a broad-brush thesis unsatisfactory. Personally, while I did not agree with many of Rieff's asides, I found the text an immensely thought-provoking read due to its eclectic content and essay format. It raises a range of controversial questions which force us to think through some of the disastrous implications collective memory can have, and is therefore a success on its own terms. Characteristic of Rieff's methodological style is his propensity to raise far more questions than he answers, or even intends to answer, which, frustrating as it is at times, befits the complexity of many of the issues he tackles. Many of these will be more than familiar to scholars of peace, reconciliation and transitional justice studies whose related fields have for decades wrestled with the problem of doing further violence, both physical and symbolic, to the already violated. The eternal risk, it seems, is that while the hegemonic powers guilty of perpetrating atrocities change in their constitution, potentially leaving space for successive societies to (in theory) exercise the kind of 'active forgetting' advocated by Rieff, who decides what, when and how to 'forget' is in practice as open to contestation and conflict as ever.

Will McGowan

University of Liverpool

References

- Brown, M. and Rafter, N. (2013), 'Genocide Films, Public Criminology, Collective Memory', *British Journal of Criminology*, 53: 1017–32.
- Fassin, D. and Rechtman, R. (2009), *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*. Princeton University Press.
- Hacking, I. (1995), *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*. Princeton University Press.
- Hellmann, G. (ed.) (2013), *Justice and Peace: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Contested Relationship*. Campus Verlag.