

BOOK REVIEW

Ethics of Political Commemoration: Towards a New Paradigm, by Hans Gutbrod and David Wood, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, \$34.99 (ebook), ISBN 9783031315947, \$44.99 (hardcover), ISBN 9783031315930.

This is an ambitious and thought-provoking work that seeks to navigate the notoriously difficult and dangerous territory where collective memory meets peacebuilding. The history of nationalism is replete with the weaponization of memory for the purposes of division, exclusion, and conflict. Likewise, the histories of peacebuilding and democratization often circle around the problems created by that weaponization. The German word *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* captures that process of working through a contentious, haunting past and incorporates insights from many disciplines to tackle outstanding historic grievances, traumas, and institute mechanisms of healing, reconciliation, justice, reparation, and even forgetting.

Gutbrod and Wood's text applies a political philosophy lens to these debates. The major contribution they make is to draw lessons from the Just War tradition within philosophy to develop a roadmap for negotiating that tricky territory of commemoration and peace. Their book sketches the links between a just war and an ethical commemoration, which is worth reading for that thought-experiment alone. Their discussion is wide-ranging, drawing on a plethora of thinkers (on one page, for instance, I noted Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Michael Walzer, and Michael Rothberg).

But the point of the book, they argue, is practical: "A good framework can contribute to a constructive conversation" (9). Their project aims to understand and, in so doing, try to mitigate or pre-empt, the divisive goals and conflictual strategies of memory entrepreneurs. This policy-oriented emphasis forms the second major theme of the book. To this end, the authors harness the Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity – the Armenian prize that aims to recognize humanitarian work: "We believe that the Aurora Prize can illuminate our understanding of commemoration. It is ambitious, transformative, and inspiring. Such bright spots deserve attention" (6).

The book is structured around the tenets of the Just War theory and proceeds in three (implied) parts. Thus, Chapters 2 and 3 outline the insights of the just war theory for the questions of "What to Commemorate" and "How to Commemorate." Chapters 4 and 5 discuss practical implications of that discussion: Defending the comparison by pointing to examples of how remembrance can be framed in an ethical, non-exclusionary fashion, for instance. And, describing how this type of ethical remembering can be located in a number of divided societies (Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Northern Ireland). The short third part – the Conclusion – links Commemoration to the concept of "genuine citizenship."

An example of the authors' approach is how they draw on the *Ius ad Bellum* criterion of "right intention" being necessary to justify conflict to propose a similar argument for commemoration: "Right intention may include, for example, efforts to build bridges of understanding or to break out of vicious cycles of recrimination. When intent is political, it usually becomes an issue of public debate, which makes it easier to scrutinise than private motivation" (15). Whereas in the Just War theory the question of who gets to decide whether intent is a matter of good faith or a cause is valid tends to rest on who or what constitutes sovereign authority. However, in Gutbrod and Wood's model, "ethical remembrance engages with those who have been affected and, in turn, reinforces the legitimacy of the institutions and processes that govern. Commemoration that contributes to a better peace is most likely when decisions on commemoration are the result of a deliberative process that is accountable to the public and inclusive of different perspectives" (26).

There is a lot to be unpacked in this, but the resort to deliberative democracy can be highlighted as it emblemizes the short-hand method of the approach. Deliberative democracy certainly had a moment in the spotlight for a decade or more. However, it has been increasingly criticized by theorists for confusing deliberation and decision (“when” are decisions really made?), for its obscuring of structural exclusions, and for politically saturating spaces that are “not heterogeneous and [where] communication is not structured according to the tenets” pre-established by academics (Talissee 138). The too-easy resort to deliberative democracy is a kind of proxy for what is arguably an over-simplistic (and over-optimistic) conceptualization of commemoration, which would seem to be exactly an area where negotiation, struggle, generational and cohort change, silencing and amplification, and framing and agenda-setting, among other dynamics, would be constantly in play.

The Northern Irish case is certainly dealt with in a cursory and Panglossian fashion. Certainly, Irish nationalists were suspicious of the previous iteration of the police force, but Sinn Féin (the main nationalist party) endorse the changes to the police in 2007 – not in 2009 as the authors assert (135). The authors seem to think that the changes, which took place after the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday peace accord were difficult only for nationalists due to historic grievances (136). However, unionists felt that the police had borne the brunt of an illegal and sectarian terror campaign and that the reforms were a disarticulation of that collective memory. Certainly, at that symbolic level, police reform (coupled with prisoner release) cultivated a loss in confidence about the democratic process among many unionists, leading to the eclipse of the moderate Ulster Unionist Party by the more hard-line and religiously fundamentalist, Democratic Unionist Party. Deliberative democrats have much to teach Northern Ireland, but they continue to struggle with the kinds of ethnic zero-sum calculations that Gutbrod and Wood elide.

The simplification of the Northern Irish case makes me suspicious of their treatment of the many other examples, which I do not know as well. It also gives rise to a concern that the ethics of commemoration is a great deal more complicated than the authors claim. Despite my own caveats, there is no doubt that the book is a provocative text that attempts to map new ground in an increasingly important area. It will, therefore, be of great interest to scholars of peace and conflict and memory studies and ought to be required reading for any post- and undergraduate modules across a range of cognate disciplines.

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Reference

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