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# Book Review of Susan Neiman, *Learning from The Germans: Confronting Race and the Memory of Evil,* Allen Lane, 2019, 415 pp., £20.00, ISBN 9780241262863

Kebadu Mekonnen Gebremariam[*]

Since more than half-a-century after Hanna Arendt asserted that radical evil can be banal—in the sense that profound and unspeakable suffering is often perpetrated by persons who're unable to think, Susan Neiman's riveting book offers a compelling account of how to work off a nation's evil past. Neiman's work completes the pursuit of subjecting the phenomena of evil to intellectual scrutiny that Arendt initiated in her seminal work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt offered a framework for the understanding of radical evil that does not necessarily require the identification of perpetrators with monstrous sociopaths. Neiman argues that for nations to unshackle themselves from the mental prisons that prevent them from facing the truth of their national crimes and as a consequence heal the wounds of the past, they must follow a profound, thoughtful, if ever difficult and humbling, path towards Enlightenment. That source of enlightenment must be drawn from within the nation's history and values as evidenced by Germany's sincere attempt at working-off its Nazi past. Expressed in her concise and poignant words, "Without sources of light in our history we cannot penetrate its darkness" (382).

The title of the book is revealing. It argues that there is something profoundly exemplary, if not praiseworthy—as most Germans would find it obnoxious and self-defeating to draw pride out of the collective act of repentance for the nation's past crimes, about Germany's attempt to work-off past debts due to Nazi crimes. Although it is crucial to attend to each country's particular history and circumstances, Neiman insists that drawing on cross-cultural, human-all-too-human, similarities "can teach us about guilt and atonement, memory and oblivion, and the presence of past in preparing for the future" (37).

Admittedly the story of Germany's working-off-the-past (*Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*) is characterised by an incomplete half-successful

[*] Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Addis Ababa University, Email: kebadum@gmail.com, Tel: +251904592351, P.O. box: 1176/ Addis

process at seeking redemption. It took an awful long time for Germans to make the switch from viewing themselves as worst victims to viewing themselves as worst perpetrators (25). Despite the failures of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung,* the changes that marked the process in the 80s, however tentatively they were conceived at the time, have taken root at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Neiman's book is a work of great scholarship. It seamlessly juxtaposed her personal experience whose professed cosmopolitan values have been shaped by a childhood lived as a white girl in the segregated American South, and decades of life lived in Berlin and Israel as a Jewish American academic. These stages in her life are revelations of the fluidity of identity, while her life-choices model the conviction that morally proper ties are to agents not genealogies. The book traverses the many faces of racism and fascism from the horrors of the Holocaust via the legacies of slavery told through the story of Emmett Till, how it still manifests through structural racism and the Lost Cause narrative in the American South, to the refusal to truly acknowledge that racism is an inbuilt feature, not a mere glitch, of the institutional engines of contemporary American society. It contrasts the long and arduous, but necessary, path Germany took in confronting its dark past with the pathological ways in which responsibility for slavery and Jim Crow is collectively deflected in the deep American South. Most Germans emphatically reject a comparison between the racism of the Third Reich and American racism, insisting on the unparallel singularity of the Holocaust. That rejection, according to Neiman, is testament to how far Germany has come in taking responsibility for its national crimes (17).

The book's depth and analytic rigor owe partly to the author's sheer brilliance and partly to the time devoted to meticulous research which included considerable time spent on surveys undertaken both in Germany and in the American South. "The surveys of these two very different histories of confronting [Germany's]—and avoiding [the United States]—national legacies should give the reader an overview of how things are today" (18). Neiman offered this book as an exercise in universalism that is grounded in the recognition of difference. The book concludes by underscoring that a universalism devoted on finding shared, but not identical, souls "makes it possible to critically examine our own [particular] histories without tribalism or trauma" (384). Most importantly, the enlightenment we must seek is one that is grounded not on blind trust, but on ceaseless interrogation of the presumed progress characterising modernity: "How can we trust modernity when it led to Auschwitz?" (79). Contrariwise, being sceptical of modernity is itself a sign of progress, for it is within the framework of modernity

and the values that underpin it that one can have a compelling reason to regard violence as morally abhorrent.

The book is divided into three parts, each part comprising of three chapters. The first two parts are heavily informed by a thorough empirical research. Part one narrates the history of Germany's attempt to come to terms with its Nazi past, both before and after reunification. "For decades after the war ended, Germans were obsessed with the suffering they endured, not the suffering they'd caused" and refused to accept as justified that they were beaten down by what they've come to recognize as a moral club (40). Neiman asserts that, "Looking at *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* through the prism of East-West rivalry" to sift through "how each half of the country work, however fitfully, to turn German self-perception from victim to perpetrator" offers a template for how any nation must attempt to face its national crimes (84). The comparative analysis supports "a clear and simple thesis: East Germany [where anti-fascism was state policy] did a better job at working off the Nazi past than West Germany [where many ex Nazis assumed high government positions] (81). In the West, the Nuremberg trials were largely dismissed by the public as an instance of the victors' justice. The East, however, was successful in bringing more Nazis to justice despite itself being a police state.

In yet another sophisticated attempt to excuse the crimes of Nazi Germany, some West Germans were initially inclined to equate the GDR (communist East Germany) with the Third Reich. Comparing communism to fascism was not only a way of deflecting guilt for the latter, it also trivialises the horrors of the Nazi crimes. However, Neiman underscores that "nothing is worse than the deliberate murder of millions for being a member of the wrong tribe" (87).

That is not to say that the GDR was a model state, nor that its official anti-fascism would excuse the crimes of its famed security institute, the Stasi. Just like there is no logic to reducing the entire United States of America to its surveillance programs or its notorious extrajudicial detention centres, so in the same way "The GDR deserves the same courtesy" (83).

Part two of the book is devoted to the legacies of slavery and racism in the American South, and the many ways in which every little progress in racial justice is met out with renewed induction of progressively subtler forms of structural racism—the terrors of Jim Crow instituted in response to Reconstruction and mass incarceration and structural discrimination in jobs, housing and education to the Civil Rights Act. Whereas, part three synthesises the empirical research with moral and political theory.

The Deep South is still suffering from the sting of defeat in the American Civil War the memory of which many white descendants have pathologically interwoven with every aspect of their life and as a consequence identifying the idea of renouncing the legacy of slavery and racism in the South with the renouncement of life itself. That shows:

> "The inclination to set one's own suffering *über alles* isn't particularly German, nor is it particularly new. Competitive victimhood maybe as close to a universal law of human nature as we're ever going to get; it is surely an old and universal sport. Germany was no less inclined to participate in it than the defeated American south. Though the south's defeat is older, you can hear the same litany (63).

Hardly anyone tolerates the thought that their suffering is without meaning. Out of that instinct grows the need to weave a narrative that confers meaning to their pain and suffering—real or imagined, while being indifferent to whether the narrative is consistent with the historical truth for which it is an experiential referent as long as it is sufficiently comforting as well as enveloping a framework for deflecting responsibility. "Often it's the suffering of the ancestors, more imagined than experienced, that drives the search for a framework with which to understand it" (63).

How can a nation navigate through the various ways in which human beings deflect guilt, and as a consequence collectively confront its national crimes?

Neiman outlines a list of necessary, but admittedly non-exhaustive, steps a country must take on a path to working off its historical debts. (1) The country must work to achieve a coherent and widely accepted national narrative. Instead of adopting procrustean revisionism about history that aligns with the memory of pain and humiliation, memory must be recast to fit the truth about what actually happened in the past. (2) Reconstructing narratives must begin with words and symbols that are placed in remembrance of the dead. It is by the heroes we valorise and the victims we mourn that we reveal the essence of the values that inform our lives. Most Confederate monuments in the South were erected long after the American Civil War "in a concerted effort to defeat truth itself" (187) as an expression of a malevolent motive to undermine the rights won by American Americans. Knowing when the monuments were built is a reliable indicator of why they were built. Regardless of the private innocence of soldiers at war, "a valiant figure dignified in Bronze and stone has a way of lending dignity to the cause itself…[or] reflects, at the very best, ambivalence about the values for which that

soldier died, whether or not a particular soldier shared them" (264). How could a group of people be so hateful and contemptuous that they choose to rub salt on African American wounds by honouring the generals who fought to keep them enslaved?

In answering that question, it is tempting to cast radical evil as a sort of moral malignance for which a closer clinical description maybe the notion of social psychosis. Neiman is in complete agreement with Arendt in that both advised against the error of equating human malevolence with Mephistophelian possession. The act of isolating perpetrators outside of the sphere of moral accountability only works to pedestalize criminals as psychotic or as enchanted by evil, and effectively move the discussion of radical evil from politics to pathology. Such transference of radical evil from the moral-political realm into the occult "leaves no room for any reasoned discussion of political principles and practices" (88).

What's more appropriate is erecting monuments for slavery and racism that can evoke shame (detached from guilt), constant self-distrust that lends itself to the determination not to repeat them, and the vigilance to identify any signs of resurgent bigotry. Germany did erect monuments for victims of Nazi fascism with varied degrees of success between the East and the West. "A nation that erects a monument of shame for the evils of its history in its most prominent space," Neiman writes, "is a nation that is not afraid to confront its own failures" (270). A visit to the Holocaust memorials, the Wehrmacht Exhibit, or to one of the concentration camps create a sense of entering a sacred space not only because such spaces automatically invoke in us a sense of reverence for the dead but also because they ask of us to justify ourselves. As Jan Philipp Reemtsma, a lifelong advocate of German *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* and the initiator to the Wehrmacht Exhibit, has put it: "A sacred space is not our object, we are its object. It doesn't have to justify its existence to us; we have to justify our ways of living before it" (quoted in Neiman, 281).

(3) Narratives take root in society if they are conveyed through education. It is important to think through what children are thought to remember and what they're meant to forget. While school textbooks in America left out the genocide of Native Americans largely, ignored Jim Crow and pay lip service to the horrors of slavery, East German history books were unambiguously antifascist from the outset. More importantly, the latter didn't feed children false narratives about the Axis defeat and that the horrors of Nazi crimes were portrayed as despicable as they were. (4) The arts and music offer creative way of installing values in young children, and nothing is more powerful in expressing peoples' best hopes than a national anthem done properly. (5) Concrete acts of genuine reform must be the

foundation of any sincere attempt at redeeming the past. If a nation is serious about reconciliation it must first bring perpetrators to justice and make concrete restitutions to victims of injustice—none of which the United States has been willing to consider. Also included must be education, housing, prison reforms, and other social programs that guarantee equality of opportunity.

A profound working off the past requires not just a social exercise of reason but also an exercise in remoulding social psychology— that a sort of psychoanalytical catharsis need to take place as well. Should there be compelling reasons to set priorities, Neiman believes that political commitments— "expressed in laws preventing expressions of racism, punishing racist crime, and roundly condemning it from the highest level of government to the teaching in elementary schools"—come first (116).

Neiman believes "in what Jean Améry called the central truth of the much-maligned Enlightenment: 'Knowledge leads to recognition, and recognition to morality'" (167). The truth about genocide and slavery in America must be taught in all its intricate nuances; that will inevitably lead to the recognition that it is an internal problem for which every American is responsible. Neiman asserts that "African American history in all its torment and glory is American history, and we cannot move forward until all Americans see it that way" (255). Is it a tall order? Perhaps! But it seems to be the only way forward.

A progress that can be trusted is one that help society accept ambivalence and nuance, while at the same time able to give moral clarity to the effect that "when moral standards are violated, the community must reassert them, even if the wrongdoers themselves show no recognition of their crimes" (374). The path to Enlightenment is very demanding, and its redemptive power rests on, as Améry argues, its readiness at "permitting resentment to remain alive in one camp and, aroused by it, self-mistrust in the other" (309). Améry spoke of resentment not the sort that foments the desire for vengeance and destruction, but of the sort that inspires hope by enveloping an introspective (albeit paradoxical) revolt against reality. He spoke of an indignation that reflects the recognition that certain things ought never have happened, a tussle with reality that is rational in so far as it is moral.

Progress is measured by the extent to which it challenges and transforms social conventions that no longer serve us. Every moment in history is characterised by unjust but dominant paradigms that are resistant to change, and, to an equal extent, societies are anchored on enduring values that confer them a recognizable national character. Progress is achieved by transforming the first while preserving the latter at the same time. The latter requires the search for a

source of light from within a nation's history that is capable of empowering us "to construct a moral memory that can be universally shared" (373).

Here's one idea that comports with the vision for constructing a moral memory. Neiman acknowledges some truth to the notion that "we live in a post-heroic moment: it is easier to acknowledge victims than to lift-up heroes" (92). She suggests that we flip the script and remodel public spaces in ways that are abundant with monuments of "the few brave enough, and foresighted enough to stand up to the conventions of their times, even [and especially] when those conventions are rotten". For "it takes heroes to do so, when most of us prefer to be victims nowadays" (242).

America's failure to face its past not only leaves open wounds but also paralyses people from moving forward in the spirit of human fellowship.

Neiman's book is a monumental achievement not only for its immense intellectual contribution to the debate about collective responsibility, it also offers a roadmap for reconciliation that ought to be followed by any country with blemished past. Ethiopia can learn a thing or two both from Germany's success and from America's failures at atoning for their historical crimes. Although the lessons we must take to heart are numerous, in my opinion, the following two stand out: that reconciliation must be anchored on the sources of light from within our history, including widely accepted moments of collective glory such as the Victory in Adwa; and secondly we must cast the shameful moments in a language that induces a sense of shame and responsibility strong enough to "make us want to live righteously". Historical facts must be established, detached from ideology, tribalism, or trauma. There is truth and wisdom in seeing the history of ethnic or culturally distinct peoples of Ethiopia, in all their glory and ugliness, as Ethiopian history. Anyone who wishes to conceive them otherwise certainly hasn't set his mind on reconciliation.

These lessons must, however, be taken with a grain of salt. Firstly, drawing historical parallels between different nations should not imply importing the categories that inform the social dynamics of power in one country for explaining the power dynamics in the other. The lessons we ought to draw are rather the process by which political communities work off their blemished past and open a hopeful chapter in their history. And secondly, history is a revolving door and that being on the right side of history at one point is no guarantee that one was or will be on history's right side. Neither does one's perceived victimhood at some historical point or in some dimension expiates one's perceived role as perpetrator at other points in history or in some other dimensions. The truth, in all its complexity, must be laid out in the open before aggrieved communities begin the

process of reconciliation. Advocates remembrance of the moment where one was on the right side in history, and amnesia on other moments "is to falsify not only history but politics and morals as well" (132). Moral myopia aligned with the understanding of one's relation to the world through tribal lenses is the most potent tool for projecting evil into something external to oneself or to one's own tribe—precisely "the surely way to perpetuate evils in the future" (132).

We must, therefore, seek to not just describe reality but to orient it. In pursuing the latter, "we're far more likely to be inspired by admiration for heroes than by pity for victims" (371). Recognizing when memory is useful in orienting the future, when it's weaponized and when it is abused is certainly a very difficult endeavour. It requires a rich and nuanced understanding of history. Above all, it takes an awful long time to penetrate the social psychology. But that is "hardly a reason for ceasing to try" (373).

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