Book Review/ Compte rendu

Berger, Ronald J., *The Holocaust, Religion, and the Politics of Collective Memory: Beyond Sociology*. 2012. New York: Transaction Publishers, 292 pp. $39.95 Paperback (978-1412843041)

In this book, Ronald Berger aims, "not to add to specialist knowledge," but to present "a comprehensive synthesis, imbued with a sociologist's sensibility, of the social science literature on the Holocaust" (2012, 3). His broader goal is to rectify "sociology's neglect of the Holocaust as an object of sociological inquiry" (5). Both goals have been met. The book presents a concise, clearly presented, comprehensive survey of the background and the history of the Holocaust, its cultural afterlife in different national contexts (Ch. 7 - Germany and Poland; Ch. 8 - Israel and the United States) and the legacy of its moral imperative in the ongoing fight against genocide (Ch. 9). Throughout, Berger contextualizes his presentation in sociological theoretical frameworks, foremost, Maurice Halbswach's theorization of collective memory, which is used as a loose frame for the entire book. The thorough bibliography is up-to-date and the use of sources careful and selective, presenting a balanced, selective survey of the critical scholarship. This book would make an excellent text for a senior undergraduate or M.A. level seminar on the Holocaust, supplemented by a selection of landmark historical studies and primary texts.

Two problems with the book will be addressed, one substantive, one theoretical. During the background research for this review, I discovered that Berger's 2012 monograph is problematically similar to his previously published *Fathoming the Holocaust* (2002). Some material has been added to the 2012 book, namely: a subsection on Max Weber (2012, 17-19); more detail on Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory (21-22; 147); more detail on the history of Judaism (Ch. 2); the addition of Poland to the discussion of the transnational competition over Holocaust memory (Ch. 5); and, a chapter on how the Holocaust's ethical imperative contributes to the fight against genocide. (Ch. 7) The last mentioned is the only section of the book that does not correspond to his previous publication, and presumably, was added to conform to the current disciplinary requirement to expand Holocaust curriculum to

include comparative genocide studies. By contrast, the 2002 book concludes with a chapter on Holocaust theology and interfaith dialogue, a normative subject of Holocaust curriculum in the late 20th century. The two books rarely read the same word for word, yet the basic organization of the material, the sequence of its presentation and most of the framing sociological theoretical notions are identical. Their close similarity begs the question: Why was the book under review not published as a second edition of *Fathoming the Holocaust*, rather than as a new monograph? While Berger includes his 2002 publication in his 2012 bibliography, he does not mention it in his preface.

Problematic in a different way is Berger's simplistic application of Maurice Halbwachs' notion of "collective memory." Berger evokes Halbwachs' work to theoretically inform his presentation of "varying postwar collective memories of the Holocaust," specifically the international competition between different nation states expressed in particular, locally constructed Holocaust narratives based on the moral discourse of victimization (2012, 147). While Berger aptly describes the competing discourses of victimization used to construct and validate public history of the Holocaust in different national contexts (Germany, Poland, Israel, the United States), he mistakenly applies Halbwach's notion of "collective memory" to this phenomenon. Indeed, he is apparently unfamiliar with the more apt notion of "cultural memory" recently theorized by Jan Assmann (2006). Halbwachs, a staunch Durkheimian, held that individual human memory was constructed by and in the crucible of actual social collectives, that is, groups of living human beings with shared lived experience (Halbwachs 1980, 1992; Assmann 2006, 8, 95). According to Halbwachs, the different social groups to which an individual belongs construct and embed overlapping collective memories that merge in the individual consciousness: the immediate and the extended family, a school class, fellow workers, one's religious community, contemporary residents of a neighborhood or a city (Halbwachs 1992). Strictly speaking, according to Halbwachs, national and transnational "collective memories" cannot exist, since these entities are too large to be social groups capable of constructing memory through direct, shared experience and belonging. Thus, a more refined theorization of memory is required to explain the politicized, competitive localized histories of the Holocaust constructed in contemporary nation states. The notion of "cultural memory" has recently been developed to describe localized reconstruction of history that is formed by and in response to a selective recording of the past in symbolic form, in Jan Assmann's words: "… the objectifications of communally remembered knowledge in the shape of cultural forms, and the…making visible of collective memory into

writing in its broadest sense" (2006, 95). "Cultural memory" is localized memory that projects beyond the formative crucible of actual collective life, synchronically and diachronically. It achieves this by objectifying collective memory into visual and/or textual archives of symbolic representation. Thus, while Berger is certainly correct in his evaluation of the role of the American media, specifically film and television, in constructing an ethically problematic, Americanized notion of the Holocaust (2012,184-185), this process cannot properly be called "collective memory," but "cultural memory." Only American Holocaust survivors and their immediate families participate in collective memory in response to such media. Assmann designates the transnational fascination with the Holocaust "a universalized bonding memory and the founding element of a global secular religion that is concerned with democracy and human dignity" (2006, 23). I would argue that the fascination with the Holocaust in the United States is generated, as well, by a particularly American ambivalence towards government: a cultural obsession with "rugged individualism" versus political authority. The Holocaust becomes a seductive, eroticized myth of individual resistance and inevitable submission to political authority, reified as the physical bodies of the Holocaust victims and/or survivors and the Nazi dominating forces, a myth highlighting the American valorization of the agency of the individual and the "dangers" of adhering to a narrow collective identity.

Berger, the son and nephew of survivors, acknowledges that his authentic (in the Halbwachsian sense) collective memories of the Holocaust strongly influenced the course of his research (2012, ix). I, too, the child and grandchild of survivors, have collective memories of the Holocaust that I have absorbed through experience in living communities. Recently I applied for funding for a project comparing the display of mummified dead bodies in catacombs in Palermo, Sicily, and the plastinated human corpses of the contemporary *Body Worlds*. When a colleague asked about my choice of research topics, I answered without hesitation: "Because I won't visit Auschwitz." A data base search under "children of Holocaust survivors" reveals the vast number of studies on the psychological and behavioral patterns of survivors' children. I was unable to find a study on the research agendas of academic professionals in this category. Judging from Ronald Berger and myself, such a study might be recommended.

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References

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