

# The Future of Memory

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**Abstract** Reaction to David Rieff's book is bound to be mixed. Its particulars are brilliant; its flaws, profuse. *In Praise of Forgetting* is misleadingly titled, for Rieff focuses primarily on the social functions of memory and its relation to history and forgetfulness. In his view, every event and person, no matter how notable today, will be ultimately forgotten. But in the short run, forgetfulness is benign, leading to reconciliation and peace. Memory, in contrast, is always malignant and distorted, yet so influential as to merge with and erode history. Rieff's assertions are matched against the cases he himself adduces, cases which he describes selectively and with minimal regard for evidence. However tendentious his arguments, the insights and vast erudition to which David Rieff treats his readers are undeniable.

**Keywords** Collective Memory · Forgetting · History · Commemoration · Domestic and International Conflict

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Interdisciplinary scrutiny is not always what it is cracked up to be, especially when social scientists review the work of journalists. Journalists' arguments, if convincing, are based on well-informed impression. But most journalists rarely collect sufficient data on the events they hurriedly cover, perform no serious analyses of their causes, qualities, or consequences,

apply no tests to determine whether the conclusions they draw are warranted. In other words, journalists and social scientists play different games. Yet, this journalist, David Rieff, is so eminent, the topics he addresses go so directly to the major issues of our time as to demand the closest attention. His essays relate directly to the present culture war and its politicization of the humanities and social sciences. At stake is our understanding of the relation among history, memory, and reality—including the sheer volume of present grievances and obsession over past wrongdoings. The author himself brings a great deal to the table: the eye-witnessing of great massacres and violent wars, a penetrating mind, captivatingly skillful expression, and broad erudition. Unfortunately, the depth of Rieff's erudition does not always match its breadth—a serious problem when certain realities come into play, realities about which a reviewer may happen to be informed.

## Oblivion

"Footprints in the Sands of Time, and All That," Rieff's opening chapter, tells us that nothing in the world is permanent; what is here today will be forgotten tomorrow. "Sooner or later every human accomplishment, like every human being, will be forgotten," (5), and once a memory disappears it cannot be recovered. Even more, "all nations and civilizations will eventually vanish just as surely as they arose (8)." Egyptian, Greco-Roman, and Chinese civilizations will cease to be remembered. Newton, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Darwin, Einstein—all are destined for oblivion. Rieff leaves it to the reader to find the basis of his assertion, which is prima facie wrong. Individuals, communities, and nations forget the past when it ceases to be relevant to them, but that leaves much to be remembered. The Big Bang occurred 17 billion years ago, but its significance makes it unforgettable.

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Notwithstanding Rieff's claim, remembering will always be more essential to *homo sapien's* survival than forgetting. Remembering enhances survival because it permits us to master the present by recovering and retaining so much of the past. Neither history nor memory work perfectly, but if they do not work well enough for practical purposes—purposes which make the human *species* unique—then human *society* becomes impossible.

In the second half of his introduction, Rieff wisely changes the subject. There is nothing innocent about memory, he says, which implies it must be guilty of something. Power to make falsehoods persuasive has something to do with the matter, for the past is more likely to be preserved by deceitful winners than honest losers. Yet, without a blush, he contradicts himself by explaining that the North, *winner* of the American Civil War, hastened to capitulate to the “Myth of the Lost Cause,” a system of commemorative symbols, rituals, and texts produced in the vanquished South to justify its costly struggle, canonize its leaders and demean its newly emancipated blacks. Better for Southerners to forget the war, Rieff says, than to press their version of it onto otherwise virtuous Northerners.

The author's understanding of The Lost Cause warrants special comment because it illustrates a problem that appears throughout his book, namely, an inclination to fly too high above the ground. Doing so ignores ordinary Southerners' inner lives, reduces the past “as it *essentially* was” to a fabrication summarizing white Southerners' perceptions of their lost war. Yet, “if history is not a mere puppet show,” Georg Simmel declared, “then it must be the history of mental processes”<sup>1</sup> What role, then, could the Lost Cause ideology, or any postwar ideology, have played in the mentality of the typical white Southerner? This question goes to the core of our author's thinking about memory and history. He is exceptionally alive to the formation of narratives; less so to their reception.

From beginning to end, Rieff is perceptive on details, but he fails to acknowledge, let alone capture, his subjects' consciousness of their worlds. As the Civil War progressed, prices surged in the South, wages plummeted, starvation became common. Fought almost entirely on Southern soil, the war created westward streams of white refugees, at least 200,000 of them. Productivity fell two-thirds. Death and injury decimated the marriage market, disrupting family structures and traditions. Fully one-quarter of military-aged men died; another quarter, at least, suffered injury. Prosthetic replacements for limbs proved to be a major Southern industry. To say that slavery, the principal exculpatory object of the Lost Cause, held a privileged place in the memory of most whites vastly distorts their experience. At least three-quarters of Southern families owned no slaves and were in constant competition with families sustained by free slave labor. Meanwhile, Southern nationalism intensified reactions to the

“unconstitutional invasion” of the Southern homeland and irreparable destruction of its assets. These were the blows which motivated most Southerners to fight. The preservation of slavery was someone else's war, and when that war was over, ordinary Southerners concerned themselves with food, clothing, and shelter—matters having little to do with Southern intellectuals' storybooks. In brief, the impact of the Lost Cause was limited because most white Southerners never knew about it, and their distinctive racism did not depend on it. They remembered the war, but not through a Lost Cause lens.

## Forgetting

To begin this review critically is ironic, given that David Rieff's perspective is well established in Western thought. It brings to consciousness the Greek goddess, Lethe, who continues to symbolize forgetfulness and oblivion. Lethe is indeed the personification of amnesia, which a drink from the river named for her induces, the better to ease the uncanniness of reincarnation into another being. The dead must erase all memory of their earthly life to perfect their postmortem conversion.

Lethe's virtue applies to societies and individuals alike. “A decent measure of communal forgetting,” Rieff declares, “is actually the *sine qua non* of a peaceful and decent society” (57). The community which erases memory of the past makes secure its peace and decency. “[I]s it not conceivable,” therefore, “that were our societies to expend even a fraction of their energy on forgetting that they now do remembering, peace in some of the worst places in the world might actually be a step closer” (143). As memory is embodied in its media, however, such energy would have to be expended by demolishing monuments and statues, burning books, renaming streets and buildings, razing pictures, paintings, and films, censoring “inappropriate” materials of any kind. Also, what does it take to establish a “community of forgetting,” and how does it protect itself from other communities which prefer to remember? How can anyone even know that an event has been forgotten if no trace of it is remembered? The reader is thus blind as to how Rieff would define *collective* forgetting or assess its causes and consequences.

Rieff's reference to the memory of Masada exemplifies these problems. For almost 2000 years, generations of Jews had never heard of Herod's Masada retreat. Then, in the late 1920s, Yitzhak Lamdan wrote his famous poem about the fortress—an expression not of defiance or triumphalism, as Rieff stresses, but of despair during economic depression and net outmigration.<sup>2</sup> How Lamdan came to know about

<sup>1</sup> Georg Simmel, *Problems in the Philosophy of History: An Epistemological Essay* (1907), 39–40.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Schwartz, Yael Zerubavel, and Bernice Barnett. 1986. “The Recovery of Masada: A Study in Collective Memory.” *Sociological Quarterly* 27: 147–164. See also Bernard Lewis, *History-Remembered, Recovered, Invented* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975),.

Masada is the question. During almost twenty centuries of *apparent* oblivion, there lived individuals, surely a small number, with an interest in preserving its memory. They are Lamdan's sources. It is ultimately *they* whom a "community of forgetting" must annihilate.

Rieff can ignore this issue because he contents himself with the mere assertion that peace and decency would prevail if horrific events were erased from history and their commemorative symbols removed. But Max Weber would have rewritten his claim more persuasively: "[I]f a single historical fact is conceived of as absent [i.e., forgotten] in a complex of historical conditions, it would condition a course of historical events in a way which would be different in certain historically important respects."<sup>3</sup> As Rieff ignores this "complex of historical conditions," the reader cannot distinguish the situations in which forgetting promotes misery, injustice and conflict from those where forgetting promotes well-being, amity, and reconciliation.

Because reconciliation figures so centrally in Rieff's virtues of forgetting, he is quick to seize on World War II. "The Second World War is over," he says, "not just in reality but also in people's hearts" (132). This war will eventually be forgotten. After all, two decades after the war ended, Americans and other Westerners enthusiastically traded and cooperated with their once bitter enemies. But Rieff neglects to mention common Cold War enemies as factors reinforcing forgetfulness. Also, he limits himself to cases in the West. The very epitome of forgetfulness leading to reconciliation is to be found in Cambodia, whose citizens have in fact forgotten Pol Pot's atrocities—even atrocities against their own family members—and even live peacefully among former members of Khmer Rouge. Here is a chance to define the conditions under which forgetting leads to forgiving and peace, but Rieff passes it by. As Buddhists, Cambodians can be less concerned with revenge because of their belief that wrongdoers will receive their due through unfavorable reincarnation.<sup>4</sup>

Only 15% of the South Korean population is Buddhist, while more than half belong to no religious institution. Few believe in reincarnation. Very recently, a group of South Korean scholars completed an encyclopedia of collaborators during the 1915–1945 Japanese occupation, while the Japanese government, even more recently, withdrew its emissary when a statue dedicated to Comfort Women was unveiled outside its Pusan consulate. The Second World War, then, remains in the hearts of Northeast Asians, whose elites have developed a concept, "the history problem," to describe it. Rieff's argument would perplex them. To some extent, however, his praise of forgetfulness makes sense. Exemplified by conflicts over Japanese, Chinese,

and Korean history textbooks, the sincerity of official apologies, common respect for ancestors, and shame over defeat and failure, the Second World War history problem continues to inhibit transformative politics, slow the pace of national and regional growth, and obscure the importance of Northeast Asia's relations with the widening world community.

If the author ignores the power of memory in the East, he vastly exaggerates it elsewhere. The Serbs' heavy losses in stopping the Turks in 1389, he explains, inspired their atrocities against Bosnian, Kosovar and Albanian Muslims. Although the 1389 Battle of Kosovo Polje is a prominent part of the school curriculum and initially transformed Serbian soldiers into embodiments of their hero-ancestors, news of their atrocities against the helpless rapidly severed past from present. Other forces were at work, most obviously the break-up of Yugoslavia and resurfacing of intense religious conflict among its former republics. Indeed, one might reasonably argue that even if *Kosovo Polje* had never happened, Serbs of the 1990s would have attacked their neighbors.

Rieff also exaggerates the impact of historical parallels: the invocation of 1389 in Serbian history, the Crusades in Islamic history, the Holocaust in Israeli history. He defines these parallels as "manipulations of history" or "anti-historical exercises." The thinking process itself, however, matches reality to conceptual models—including historical models—which articulate it.<sup>5</sup> Above all, Rieff's attribution of a collective revenge motive to Serbs confounds causal direction. The conjuring of Kosovo Polje did not cause the Serbs to attack Croats and Muslims; it instilled the wars with meaning by exploiting the human need to make sense of struggle, suffering, and death.

## Remembering

The antonyms of Rieff's forgetting and oblivion are remembering and preserving. The Greeks embodied this opposition in their goddesses, Lethe and Mnemosyne. The personification of memory, Mnemosyne was a Titaness and mother of the Muses. If some shades drank of the River Lethe before being reincarnated, others took from the River Mnemosyne and remembered their previous lives. Performers and orators invoked Mnemosyne in order to perfect what they intended to say. Ordinary Greek citizens regarded the memory goddess as essential to the preservation of their past, their culture, and their identities. Where the past is retained mainly by word of mouth, as it is in oral cultures, forgetting is no virtue.

The prominence of Mnemosyne cannot be overestimated. She is omniscient. So great is her store of knowledge that those who invoke her have access to ultimate wisdom: a

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: Free Press, 1949), 166

<sup>4</sup> Carol Kidron, "Universalizing Trauma Descent Legacies: A Comparative Study of Jewish-Israeli and Cambodian Genocide Descent Legacies." Pp. 59–89 in *Violent Reverberations*. Edited by Vigdis Broch-Due and Bjorn Enge Bertelsen (New York: Springer, 1916).

<sup>5</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 214. For detail, see the classic statement of E. Galanter and M. Gerstenhaber, "On Thought: The Extrinsic Theory," *Psychological Review* 63 (1956) 218–227.

comprehension of “origins” and “beginnings,” i.e., primordial realities from which all else emerged. For David Rieff, however, persons remember in the narrowest way: memory is the ideal transmitter for the view that “a nation is a group of people united by a mistaken view of the past and a hatred of their neighbors” (138).<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Rieff criticizes President George W. Bush’s post-9/11 speech for failing “to acknowledge the possibility that it was America’s actions globally rather than the American way of life that the jihadis hated” (128). But Western Europe, not the United States, colonized the Middle East. It is beneath Rieff’s dignity to declare solely for its shock value that America got what it deserved on 9/11, that “the chickens had come home to roost,” as President Obama’s former spiritual advisor, Reverend Jeremiah A. Wright, put it. Rieff must have had a reason for his own 9/11 remark, but failure to defend it is part of the pattern of airy, context-free, statements which distinguish his book.

This matter, the indispensability of context, requires comment. Outside Israel’s Assaf Hill, a West Bank community consisting of about 30 families, appears a sign: “We have come back home.” The “memory” of diaspora, which this sign summarizes, “disastrously” deformed Israeli society (139), Rieff observes, but he does not say how or how much. The diaspora was actually *minimized* in Israeli culture and history curricula before Menachem Begin’s administration, which means the society’s deformation began when the conservative Likud Party assumed control in 1977—and long before settlements like Givat Assaf were even contemplated.

Not only Israeli society but also its archeologists carry Rieff’s targets on their backs. Yigael Yadin is known to have tweaked his discoveries to dramatize Israel’s ancient history; nowhere, however, is archeology in the service of national identity condemned more violently.<sup>7</sup> Israeli archeology would be indeed less relevant to national identity if influential men like David Rieff ceased to question Israel’s legitimacy. The Museums of Iraq, Egypt, and other Muslim nations certainly contain the same kinds of objects that appear in Israel, but our author is strangely uncritical of their legitimizing function.

The reader need not dwell on David Rieff’s political partiality to recognize that his book turns on a contradiction: collective forgetting is its stated theme, but collective remembering, the topic of half its chapters, is its principal concern. Rieff is the master of collective memory’s pathologies; his problem, as will be seen, is to mistake these pathologies for its paradigm.

Memory, for Rieff, is escapist, idyllic, a warrant for nostalgia; it expresses “the dictatorship of nostalgia” (93). Yearning for yesterday is a salve for the troubles of today. Pick any historical event: our understanding of it will reflect our present

troubles more than its reality. More precisely, “memory is little more than the present in drag” (108). Yesterday, in other words, is a twisted representation of today. Memory does sustain identity and morale, Rieff concedes, but its essence is shady and socially harmful; it warps the past realities it represents. Indeed, the greater its distortions, the more convincing its representations.

Memory promotes turmoil, injustice, and violence; forgetting makes for order, fairness, and peace. Such an assertion can only be true if George Santayana’s familiar dictum is as wrong as Rieff believes: “Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it” (58). Conceived as a moral and social imperative, an “unassailable piety” (59), as Rieff puts it, the deterrent value of historical memories is illusory. Plainly, Rieff overstates his case. Holocaust memory, it is true, did not prevent the slaughters in Srebrenitsa and Rwanda, but the effect on German memory of National Socialism was and remains palpable, as is Japanese memory of the Pacific War and its nuclear climax. Remembering the devastation of defeat, not the forgetting of it, has made these former aggressor nations peaceful. Remembrance of no catastrophe prevents another from happening, but to forget a catastrophe that has occurred is, for most nations, as difficult as it is foolish.

Readers must now briefly step out of their boxes. Many conceptions of collective memory exist, but all imply or refer to the *distribution* throughout society of what individuals *know*, *believe*, and *feel* about past events and persons, how they *morally judge* them, how closely they *identify* with them, and how much they are *inspired* or *repelled* by them as models for their conduct and identity.<sup>8</sup> Correspondingly, collective forgetting refers to the diminishing frequency with which these units of understanding—belief, feelings, moral judgments, identification and ideals—are expressed across communicative media.

The concept of “*collective* memory,” and, by extension, “collective forgetting,” appear regularly in Rieff’s essays, but he regularly denies their reality. “Quite simply, the world does not have memories; nor do nations; nor do groups of people. Individuals remember, full stop” (54). Who speaks of collective memory speaks metaphorically, not descriptively. But consider public opinion. Although public (collective) opinion, like collective memory, can only be assessed by questioning individuals, these opinions assume new significance in their assemblage. Collective memory, too, is a super-personal entity that transcends the individual. Persons having no knowledge of one another’s existence entertain comparable thoughts and feelings about the past. Furthermore, there is no “working” and “long-term” memory at the collective level; no average belief and variation at the individual level. Each level

<sup>6</sup> Quote from Karl Deutsch. No citation.

<sup>7</sup> Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Sacrificing Truth and the Myth of Masada* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Barry Schwartz, “Rethinking the Concept of Collective Memory.” Pp. 27–39 in *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*, Edited by Anna Lisa Tota and Trever Hagen (New York: Routledge, 2016)



of memory has its own sources, qualities, and functions; each is governed by its own principles.<sup>9</sup> Nations and communities as well as individuals remember, full stop.

## Commemoration

By now the gap between ancient and contemporary conceptions of memory can be acknowledged, but nothing has been said about commemoration. There are no Greek gods or goddesses of commemoration, but the Greeks lived in a *culture of commemoration*, a phrase underscored to express the elaborateness with which their funeral and burial practices, statuary, monuments, song, and ritual marked the memory of the gallant dead.

Many scholars, including Stalinist radicals like Erik Hobsbawm (née Hobsbaum) see commemorative events and objects as things invented by power elites, and Rieff's approving references to him reveal the same bent of mind. How utterly different, therefore, are classical and postmodern conceptions of memory and commemoration. For deconstructionists to identify with an ancient god or goddess, to marvel at ancient images, monuments, and rituals, is unimaginable. Hobsbaum and Rieff, both master deconstructionists, disdain memory and commemoration. They cannot see them as sources of moral direction, inspiration, consolation, or wisdom; they can only see them in terms of political legitimization, veils to cover historical misdeeds.

Precisely at this point, however, Rieff's genius becomes most apparent. His sensitivity to detail, his efforts to see grand significance in the most trivial object, is stunning. For New Zealanders to wear poppies once a year, he notes, is well and good, but to wear them every day of the year, as American politicians wear flag lapel pins, is to be chauvinistic. Who else could make so much of shirt and jacket pins? Discovery of genius, however, necessarily reveals its constituent ineptitudes—in this case, failure to understand why a traditionally multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-religious nation like the United States requires conspicuous, abstract, and therefore shareable symbols of *civic* solidarity—notably the national flag—while traditionally homogeneous nations, like New Zealand, given their greater *primordial* solidarity, are more likely to take their identity for granted and less inclined toward ostentatious symbolic display.

More elevated levels of commemoration, including history museums, also arouse Rieff's suspicion. Unlike natural history and technology museums, history museums are commemorative sites because they lift from the historical record and elevate those events which express or violate the moral values of the community or nation, then mark them with monumental symbols and

elaborate displays. Rieff, however, cannot get over museum “set dressings,” which include American battle flags which frame the National Holocaust Museum's entrance in Washington, DC. Russian and British troops, he reminds us, liberated many death camps. But the Washington museum is on American, not Russian or British, soil. He is also bothered by photos of David Ben-Gurion declaring Israeli statehood at the very end of the exhibit. The connection between the American flags and Israeli statehood is the very epitome of kitsch: kitsch American triumphalism and nationalism introduce the exhibit; kitsch Zionism concludes it. One can only wonder if Rieff finds anything kitsch-like about Washington's National Museum of African-American History and Culture or the National Museum of the American Indian. As Rieff never tells us what is kitschy about the Holocaust Museum's flags or Ben-Gurion photograph, the reader may assume that he believes they conceal something comy, distasteful, or morally offensive.

The reader would be correct. David Rieff informs us that the Holocaust Museum presents a “highly partisan pro-Israeli view of the creation of the state” (81). Whether visitors are thinking of Israel as they pass through the many exhibits of European atrocity is at least debatable. This might be Rieff's problem. He approvingly quotes Tony Judt on the Holocaust's justifying any policy of the State of Israel with regard to its neighbors or its Arab minority. He neglects to tell his readers that Tony Judt was a radical Israel-hater—if such a term might be properly applied to a man who believes Israel has no right to exist. Knowing war as well as he does, one is astonished to find Rieff's allowing Judt to shape his judgment. For to question Israel's legitimacy, and Rieff comes close to doing so, only adds to the probability of war by justifying the lust for Israel's annihilation. Rieff pushes his justification further: the Holocaust is a dubious source of legitimization of Israel because the Palestinians had no role in it. This statement implies that ownership of the land east of the Mediterranean belonged for more than four centuries to Palestinians rather than the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain. This implication is deceptive, but the author's reference to Palestinian innocence is pointless without it. That the UN's creation of Israel rather than the Arab's invasion of Israel caused a Palestinian catastrophe (*Nakhba*) is equally false. Here we are reminded of Rieff's earlier failure to grasp the significance of the Myth of the Lost Cause, a failure resulting from his ignoring the context of the case he himself invoked. The present context consists not of a Palestinian claim to statehood but a decision to reject statehood in 1947, 1993, 2000, and 2008—to fight rather than accept an infidel, nay, Jewish, “entity” in the midst of *Dar al Islam*. Dismissing all background, Rieff again fails to get to the core of the matters which concern him.

To remember and commemorate horrific events like the Holocaust make nothing happen; but they do preserve a mentality and sensibility, express a way of dealing with experience, bring the past forward where new generations can observe and experience it anew—all with a view to some moral progress,

<sup>9</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, [1895] 1938); “Individual and Collective Representations.” Pp 1–34 in Emile Durkheim: *Sociology and Philosophy*, Trans. D.F. Pocock (New York: Free Press, [1895] 1974; Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, “The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences” (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

some recognition of the sanctity of human life. This is definitely not one of the things collective memories, in Rieff's opinion, "are good for" (43–59). As to the question of whether collective memory and its commemorative vehicles can perform these functions without distorting the historical record, his answer is also emphatically negative. He assures us that he is not prescribing a society of amnesiacs, but never gets around to telling what amnesia is "bad for."

## History

Neither Clio, the Greek muse of history, nor her descendents up to the Enlightenment, would have been deconstructionists. For them history was true. History preserved and extolled good men and their deeds. David Rieff believes that Clio is wrong, that history is about to dissolve in the acids of memory. This will happen because we live in an era of instant gratification. To recall the past, however warped any recollection might be, is easier than the tedium of exploring, gathering, and analyzing data. As memory legitimizes worldviews, it replaces history; therefore, distortion of reality must become history's guiding principle. "Truthiness," the *feeling* that something must be true or false, regardless of evidence, is persuasive enough. Some constructionist versions of the historical record, including the postmodern, Rieff concedes, go too far, but he will not deny constructionist principles.

Conceptual confusions and bias superimposed on blatant warping of historical fact often undermine the coherence of this book. That Bradley (a.k.a. Chelsea) Manning revealed details of a *massacre* of Iraqis and Afghans by American military and was "then sentenced to thirty-five years in prison *as a result*" (emphasis added) is, in the words of Wolfgang Pauli, "not even wrong." No one denies the irrepressible tendency of states to hide certain events in their history and to celebrate others, but Manning's illegally dispersing classified information challenged national secrecy laws and put his comrades' lives at risk. He received a prison sentence for committing a crime against the state, not for shaming it. How his case illustrates memory's "victory" over history (60–75) is a question many readers will ask.

Far from being incompatible with history, as Rieff insists, memory is its indispensable source. Professional historians depend on both physical artifacts and the memories left behind in eye-witness testaments, diaries, memoirs, travel accounts, stories, broadsides, scriptures, and other objects, including media accounts, all of which preserve the memory of events. History and memory are interdependent, not competing, ways of knowing the past. Collective memory cannot dominate history because the two perform different functions, ebb and flow under different conditions, and have different consequences.

Rieff's failure to acknowledge history's dependence on memory is evident in one of his own sources. Citing Yosef Yerushalmi, he tells his readers that memory alone supplied

ancient Judaism with its sense of the past. The injunction *Zakhor!* (Remember!) referred only to God's great acts on behalf of his people. What more was there to know? Rieff forgets to tell his readers that Yerushalmi considers the post-Davidic Scriptures as decent sources of history. Also, after the 1860s, the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment), which accompanied the vacating of Europe's ghettos, made Jewish history a branch of the larger discipline. But from Rieff's selective references to Yerushalmi no one would know it. One would never know that Jewish history now dominates Jewish memory.

## Against Memory

Perhaps David Rieff lends himself to misunderstanding. He seems to pick examples willfully, assuming his readers will get the point he takes for granted, namely, that past virtues conceal past iniquities, any reminder of which intensifies present troubles. This proposition feels "truthy" enough (in the present meaning of the word), but the conditions under which it is "true" (in the traditional meaning of the word) might be limited.

The contribution of forgetting to social order and progress, which is well established and relatively uncontroversial in Western thought, has been revived in the work of Charles Maier, Paul Connerton, and Jeffrey Goldfarb, among many others.<sup>10</sup> The most provocative writing in this area, however, is David Rieff's. His fierce resolve to privilege forgetfulness over memory sets him apart.

If a reviewer were instructed to identify the author's two major weakpoints, however, it would be his failure to emphasize that even if iniquities are perpetrated then forgotten by one society, they are remembered by others. Secondly, how can a nation benefit from forgetfulness? Here, Rieff invokes Ernest Renan: "Forgetfulness, and I would even say historical error, are essential in the creation of a nation. Historical research, by revealing unwanted truths, can even endanger nationhood. All nations, even the most benevolent in later practice, are founded on forgotten acts of violence."<sup>11</sup> Getting down to facts, however, one wonders what acts of violence have been erased from

<sup>10</sup> Charles Maier, "A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy, and Denial," *History and Memory* 5: 1936–51; Paul Connerton, "Seven Types of Forgetting," *Memory Studies* 1 (2008): 59–72; Jeffrey Goldfarb, "Against Memory," Pp.53–64 in *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*, Edited by Anna Lisa Tota and Trevor Hagen (New York: Routledge, 2016). See also Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Ernst Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" ("What is a Nation?"), Paper delivered at Sorbonne Conference, 1882. Rieff shares the tendency of leftist scholars to omit mention of Renan's principal basis of nationhood: "'A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which are really one, constitute this soul and spiritual principle. One is in the past, the other, the present. One is the possession in common of a rich trove of memories; the other is actual consent, the desire to live together, the will to continue to value the undivided, shared heritage....To have had glorious moments in common in the past, a common will in the present, to have done great things together and to wish to do more, those are the essential conditions for a people.'"

*America's* history. Wrongdoings and atrocities punctuate the American past, but these are known. Renan and Rieff further burden the reader with unfalsifiable claims. If nationhood and statehood are secured by truly violent events, then how can we know it if these events have been forgotten?

For Joseph Ratzinger, formerly Pope Benedict XIV, the issue is not memory itself but its object. He notes how the West has opened its arms to all people and their convictions, "but it has lost all capacity for self-love. All that it sees in its own history is the despicable and the destructive; it is no longer able to perceive what is great and pure."<sup>12</sup> Ratzinger's observation corresponds to Pierre Nora's designation of the present time as an "Era of Commemoration," which largely perpetuates the memory of victims of injustice and of despised minorities. "The explosion of minority memories," Nora observes, has changed commemoration's function. Paralleled by the "democratization of history, it has come to resemble a protest movement, a "revenge of the underdog. . . ."<sup>13</sup> This movement is managed not by the underdogs themselves but by those who sympathize with them. Rieff may be one of these people. *How* memories of the oppressed should be preserved or forgotten, however, cannot be inferred from anything he asserts in his book.

To end this review on a negative note is impossible. Writers are judged not only by the validity of their claims but also by their capacity to reopen the central issues of their field and to set them afire, to challenge indifference, to show why issues

are worth arguing about in the first place. All writers are possessed by what Arthur Lovejoy called a "metaphysical pathos," that pattern of sentiments which envelope propositions and refutations.<sup>14</sup> Rieff's pathos is fatalistic, telling us more about how we get things wrong about remembering and forgetting than how we get things right. The telling itself has been this reviewer's concern.

That David Rieff presents no systematic method for evidence-gathering and analysis is certain. Many of his propositions about forgetting and remembering deserve unconditional rejection. Yet, the exposition of his beliefs is dazzling and induces in the reader emotional as well as intellectual engagement. His observations, including those which are demonstrably false, enliven a field which, after almost forty years, has begun to exhaust itself and settle into a comfortable theoretical sclerosis. David Rieff has produced a meaty book which quickens the pulse and into which readers may sink their teeth, a book which, at three times its length and price, is more than worth the effort to read.

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, "The Spiritual Roots of Europe: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. Pp. 51–80 in Joseph Ratzinger and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: Europe, Relativism, Christianity, Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 78–9.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Nora, "Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory." Eurozine [www.eurozine.com](http://www.eurozine.com).

<sup>14</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 11.