Terrortimes, Terrorscapes

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The past is omnipresent in contemporary America. References to temporal and memory continuities as explored in this volume abound in American discourses today. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s video message on Twitter from June 2019 that ICE detention facilities were like Nazi concentration camps, for example, created a historical analogy to equate present injustices in the United States with past horrors in Nazi Germany. Predictable outrage from Conservatives such as Representative Liz Cheney and an equally anticipated defense from liberals followed. Seconded by genocide scholars, many liberals argued that the term should be seen in its historical continuities from colonial times to the Holocaust to today. Yet the debate focused mostly on the historical and moral validity of her claim rather than on the flawed purpose of making the Holocaust the yardstick by which to measure today’s injustices.

As historical continuities span a large arc across time and space, memory analogies too invite a comparison between different ways to commemorate the past. Susan Neiman recently argued that Germany’s alleged success in working through its Nazi past was a model for America’s struggle to atone for slavery and its long legacy of discrimination and prejudice. This intervention is embedded into the larger debate in the
United States on the legacy of the Confederacy, its falling monuments, and the long shadow of slavery still present today. Here too, the debate centers more on prescribing how the United States should engage the past and less on the purpose and consequences of making German memory the measure of redemption.

This short epilogue explores the question of whether historical and memory analogies are useful in understanding our current moment in time. It argues that invoking the horrors of the Holocaust to protest against Donald Trump’s detention practices at the border and measuring American memory against redemption achieved elsewhere says little about the past, which is—as this volume shows—always a complex web of entangled meanings. By saying that the conditions in ICE detention facilities are like concentration camps and that American atonement for the past should be like Germany’s reckoning with the Holocaust, the past becomes the measure of today’s failures. Exploring continuities of violence across space and time and in memory as an overlapping fabric of ideas, **TerrorTimes, TerrorScapes** does not imply sameness of past and present horrors or sameness of pathways to redemption after them. Instead, this book probes these overlapping fabrics for underlying spatial, temporal, and memory connotations and suggests that we focus on themes to explain past horrors and the need for atonement afterward.

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The theme “Imagination and Emotions” identified in this volume particularly speaks to the current moment. Many Americans today cannot imagine that the normalcy of their lives stands in stark contrast to the experience of those discriminated against or denied safety in the United States. Their emotional response for too long has been denial and rejection, delaying what Ta-Nehisi Coates calls “a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.” This defense of normalcy has made many Americans dismiss efforts to bring down memorials to Confederates or to at least engage in conversation about the inhumanity they fought to uphold. Normalcy is also what has made many Americans blind for too long to rampant police brutality against people of color and inequality, once more brought to the fore by the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit African Americans much harder than white Americans. Emil Kerenji points to the coexistence of normalcy and horror that makes those who are not persecuted become indifferent to cruelty against others and dismiss the possibility that it might be the harbinger of worse to come. In the 1930s, ordinary Germans indeed found ample ways to normalize the Third Reich’s ostracism and persecution of Jews and others. Many even directly and knowingly profited from the plunder of Jewish possessions. Few acknowledged that their complicity in the regime’s actions paved the way for genocide, and even fewer offered any resistance when persecution turned to mass murder. Kerenji’s call for “careful historical comparison [that] does not imply sameness or necessity” might indeed inoculate us against such normalizing tendencies. His intervention should also alert us that President Trump’s 2019 cruelty and vitriol against immigrants, coupled with his defense of white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia, was the harbinger of even worse—for example, the brutal conduct of federal agents on the streets of Portland to quell peaceful protests in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and the storming of the Capitol in January 2021. It is heartening to see that so many and so diverse protesters were no longer willing to normalize police brutality, gross inequality, and a memory culture that lionizes Confederates who fought in defense of slavery. They raise attention less to the sameness of our time with historical events; instead many protesters imagine a country freed from notions of space informed by imperialism and westward expansion, history that focused on whites, and memory shaped by lost cause ideology that helped justify deeply unjust structures.

The problem with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s statement, replicated by so many others, is that it clearly implied sameness by arguing that the United States was “running concentration camps at our southern border.” Whether the early Nazi camps, American internment camps for Japanese Americans, or the later Nazi extermination camps were the reference point of her comparison was less clear. Rather than highlighting the enormous problems of ICE detention centers, past horrors taken out of their historical contexts are not the yardstick for contemporary injustices. Nor do they have to be. Americans on both sides of the aisle rejected family separation, showing that Americans share some sense of decency.
Historical analogies cannot help us understand contemporary injustice, nor can Germany’s coming to terms with the past serve as a model for America. German redemption did not only emerge from a painful recognition of the horrors Nazi Germany unleashed and the complicity of ordinary Germans in them. It also had much more transactional tendencies, as contrition coupled with half-hearted compensation was a military, political, and economic necessity for West Germany during the Cold War and in many ways still is for Germany today. Similar transactional tendencies can also be observed in how Germany atones for other atrocities today. Though Germany now recognizes its earlier colonial genocide in modern-day Namibia, it argues that the UN Genocide Convention cannot be applied retroactively to a genocide committed before its writing. This renders compensation claims arising from Germany’s recognition of the genocide obsolete. Such a disingenuous argument to avoid reparation payments suggests that there just is too little pressure and reward for such action. Just as comparison to concentration camps is not a yardstick to gauge today’s horror, German efforts to master the past are not the measure of redemption.

What if we took to heart Kerenji’s call to compare without suggesting sameness? Instead of creating benchmarks of horror and atonement, we might compare our own responses to current crises to those of earlier societal breakdowns that led to genocide and the need to atone for them. Rereading Detlef Peukert’s Weimar as Crisis of Classical Modernity, first published in 1987, it is clear that Germany’s first republic did not fall because of the lure of far-right ideologies or the charisma of Hitler. Instead, it collapsed because of widespread perception of crisis caused by Weimar’s and the global order’s instability. Crisis eroded societal bonds, compounded by myriad smaller cracks in a rapidly changing economy and society. Hitler stoked and benefited from this sense of crisis. The ensuing political fragmentation opened a void that Nazi racial ideology filled, and a highly volatile electorate started to embrace such beliefs. Today, American democracy is deteriorating too, and the January 6, 2021, storming of the Capitol to overturn an election epitomizes this. Yet it is worth noting that Trump’s power has been checked in profound ways. The public in the streets, part of the media, the courts, the military, and a majority of voters thwarted Trump’s authoritarian impulses. Congress, even after a mob had invaded its halls, voted to certify the election on that very day. Washington is not Weimar, even as we observe similar processes destabilizing democracy and a toxic fabric of ideas on space, time, and memory that is behind these processes.

These toxic ideas on space, time, and memory exacerbate the pressing and interlinked crises of today: the coronavirus pandemic, migration, climate change, racism, conspiracy theories, and rising violence. Our ability to overcome fragmentation to address such problems is diminishing, as fault lines between winners and losers of globalization are increasingly obvious. Worse still, our ability to disagree civilly about the past has been brutally stunted by violent far-right white supremacists in Charlottesville.
A pressing concern for the Biden administration and the country more generally is to strengthen societal bonds and overcome the many cracks that gross and increasing inequality have caused while restoring civil discourse about the past. That is on us, not on history. No yardstick of horror and no measure of redemption can help with that task. Yet seeing so many Americans peacefully voicing support for what might be the largest civil rights movement in American history and Confederate monuments come down is a clear indication that the processes that lead to our division can be halted.14

NOTES


5. Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” Atlantic, June 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwpNr4BRDYARIsAADIx9ybVAArF6ZGuKf9BeaS9qV17KF-q33F47VqE9e5Gm8oK3nqST8aAuOAELw_wcB.


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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


