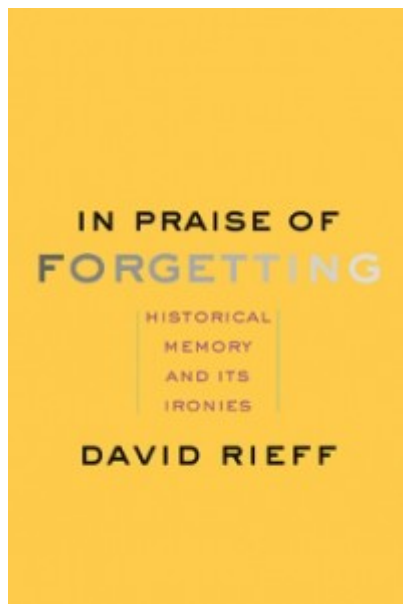


# David Rieff's In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies



In *At The Mind's Limits*, a series of essays reflecting on his time spent in the Nazi concentration camps, Jean Améry predicted that in one hundred years the murder of millions, carried out by “a highly civilized people,” will be lumped with countless other 20<sup>th</sup> century horrors and submerged in a general “Century of Barbarism.” Victims like Améry “will appear as the truly incorrigible, irreconcilable ones, as the anti-historical reactionaries in the exact sense of the word.” And history will be, perversely, the prime agent of this (and his) erasure.

Améry was not wrong. As David Rieff points out in his illuminating study, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies*, by 2045 the last survivors of Nazi atrocities will be dead. Whatever moral or intellectual satisfaction Améry might have obtained from remembrance of his atrocity will pass on to people who were not victims, people who, no matter how well-intentioned, manipulate Améry's memories and experiences to their own social, political and cultural ends

(like me, right now). “The verb to remember,” Rieff argues, “simply cannot be conjugated in the plural except when in reference to those who lived through what they communicate.”

Despite this, the collective memory industry is booming. From Washington DC to Saudi Arabia groups of concerned citizens and respectable thinkers recreate the past in their own image, projecting grievances and “the memory of wounds” into the future out of a mistaken belief in memory’s ability to prevent future crimes (take, for example, the ongoing 1916 Irish [centenary](#) or Russia’s 70<sup>th</sup> Victory Day anniversary military [chest-thumping](#)). Relying heavily on “highly questionable notions of collective consciousness,” Rieff contends, these groups have turned memory into a “moral and social imperative,” an imperative that has become one of the “more unassailable pieties of our age.” Rieff finds this notion justifiably—and demonstrably—absurd.

And yet, even if he is right, very few would find it anything less than irresponsible to contemplate the obvious, if terrifying, alternative—forgetting. Rieff just does that. Rieff’s *In Praise of Forgetting* covers a remarkable amount of ground in less than 150 pages—from Australia’s Anzac Day ceremonies and First World War Gallipoli campaign to W.B. Yeats and Ireland’s Troubles to the 9/11 Memorial and Al Qaeda—while glossing an even more remarkable number of scholars and poets for evidence of the ways in which memory is used and abused. Is it time, he wonders, that we dispense with Santayana’s famous adage about remembering the past for Nietzsche’s “active forgetting”?

Important to this counterintuitive argument is Rieff’s notion of progress. Very much like the English philosopher John Gray—who appears often in *In Praise of Forgetting*—Rieff does not really believe in progress, at least not in the traditional sense. Where many governments today consciously and unconsciously assume teleological and Whiggish

constructions of the historical record—that we are the culmination of history rather than its contingent byproduct—Rieff’s understanding of history is less palatable perhaps but infinitely more pragmatic and productive. In this version, when progress is made, it comes through ugly compromise, what John Gray describes as a “modus vivendi among civilizations,” necessary in a world where particular cultural values are, unfortunately, incommensurable.

According to Rieff, nothing impedes this type of progress more than paeans to collective memories that cannot logically exist, and which idealize a perfect rationality that humans clearly do not possess. Rieff adroitly interrogates the overreaching claims of historians like Avishai Marglit who call for some kind “of shared moral memory for humankind” to combat the “biased silences” in the historical record. Rieff compares such thinking to that of those who in the human rights communities “insist that there can be no lasting peace without justice.” Not true. History, Rieff asserts, “is replete with outcomes that provided the first while denying the second.” To Rieff, the memory community could stand to grow up a little in this respect—giving up on utopian dreams of perfectly remembered pasts for the rough and tumble politics of strategic forgetting.

But the target of Rieff’s argument is less professional historians like Marglit, who often qualify their arguments, acknowledging the dangers of memory obsessions (e.g., [Confederate memorials](#) or Bin Laden’s “[crusader armies](#)”), and more the memory industry, whose uncritical interpretations have turned experiences like Améry’s into self-validating tourist kitsch and perpetuated violence in places like Ireland for seventy years. Rieff’s book takes for granted what academics have long been wary of acknowledging—that the majority of human beings have little use for the subtleties of critical history. What they do have use for is the banalities of historical platitudes and the mysticisms of collective

memory. Cases in point: Joan of Arc's current [incarnation](#) as the enemy of immigrants in France, [Mel Gibson](#) as Scotland's national hero and any promise to make "[America Great Again](#)."

Memory for memory's sake should not be laughed at (at least not always). Rieff witnessed firsthand in the Balkans how each side used often-valid historical grievances to justify the continuation of violence. My own time working with Iraqis from 2006 to 2007 in Mosul taught me something similar. And in an U.S. election cycle dominated by grievance, it is perhaps time we start taking forgetting seriously, and not simply its consequences but also its inevitability and practicability. The alternative, the continued privileging of memory, of starry-eyed assumptions about the redemptive possibilities and inherent morality of remembrance, carries with it its own dangers, dangers we would be foolish to dismiss as third-world barbarisms.

Of course, such talk of forgetting will have its critics. Anyone who has studied race in America well knows how silence and amnesia can perpetuate violence too. And movies like the sublime *Son of Saul* prove that there are ways to remember the Shoah and other atrocities that don't descend into kitsch. Yet, after watching *Son of Saul* on my computer, advertisements proliferated in my web browser. They all asked the same thing: that this Passover, I think about investing in Israel Bonds. This surprised me. After reading Rieff's *In Praise of Forgetting*, it shouldn't have. Memory is not sacred. It is not above the present. It is not above the politics of the now. Whatever your thoughts on forgetting, it would be criminal to exchange one self-satisfied piety for another—to forget that the victims of history can be and often are persecuted by those who consider themselves the most competent and thorough of historians.