The Grand Reckoning
Can the Deep South learn from Germany’s efforts to confront its past

ERIC BANKS


ICONOCLASM IN NEW YORK: REVOLUTION TO REENACTMENT BY WENDY BELLION UNIVERITY PRESS, P.A. PENN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS. 272 PAGES. $125.

Readers in the distant future will surely note that a good number of books published in the late 2010s registered how dramatically the political landscape shifted while they were being written. Philosopher Susan Neiman’s Learning from the Germans is a case in point. The director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, Neiman decided to take a fellowship in Mississippi midway through Obama’s second term, not long after the murder of nine African American churchgoers in Charleston. In the shooting’s wake, Republican governors of South Carolina and Alabama got rid of the Confederate battle flags that had long flown over their capitolis, and Walmart stopped selling the things. The call to take down Confederate monuments of all stripes, once a fringe campaign, became a reality in several cities in the coming years. By the time Neiman had finished her fellowship, Donald Trump was in office, the movement campaign had reached the fateful stop of Charlotteville, and the president weighed in on the racially charged riot at the Right rally with the now infamous “very fine people on both sides” note.

Two summers earlier, in 2015, in the full horror of the massacre, it was easier to feel that a time of reckoning had necessarily arrived, a feeling that informs Neiman’s book, which combines reporting from the Deep South and contemporary Germany and reflections on German memory culture and the long struggle to come to terms with the past. One of the more unflinching aspects of Learning from the Germans is her conviction that American and southern realities are more flexible, or at least less inelastic, than most would think. Neiman, who spent her childhood in Atlanta, reasons that the German process took decades to turn the corner: if you take the Civil Rights Act rather than Appomattox as your year zero, the time frame is roughly comparable. “If even those raised in the heart of darkness needed time and trouble to see the light, why shouldn’t it take time and trouble to bring Americans—nurtured for years on messages of their own exceptional goodness—to come to terms with homegrown crimes?”

Neiman’s book comprises two parts. The first is dedicated to the historical underpinnings of the German reckoning with Nazism and the Holocaust beginning in the early ’60s, with television broadcasts of the Eichmann and Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, which led a younger generation to ask, for seemingly the first time, about the complicity and complexity of teachers, politicians, and above all fathers. (“Being German in my generation,” the author Carolin Emcke, born in 1967, tells Neiman, “means distracting yourself.”) Learning from the Germans narrates the subsequent political and cultural evolution, including Willy Brandt’s 1970 Kneifell in penance to the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the Historians Debate of the 1980s, and the 2003 Eisenmann’s Holocaust Memorial, a site Neiman dislikes for the vagueness of its abstract form but whose gestation was admirably long and difficult. Reenactment posed a particular set of challenges to how Nazism and the Holocaust were publicly remembered; she contrasts the record of the former East Germany with that of West Germany and largely defends the avowed antifascist state from the charge that it failed to address the German past with anything comparable to Western efforts. Three decades after reunification, the extremist AfD party explicitly frames what it calls a “guilt cult” and threatens the success of the postwar project. Yet no other country (at least in Europe or North America) has made anything like the strides Germany has toward facing the legacy of national evils, whether colonialism in Britain and France or slavery and Jim Crow in America. Only in 2009 did the US Senate approve a resolution apologizing to black Americans for slavery.

The second part of Learning from the Germans is a survey of the new and old sites of public memory in Mississippi and neighboring states: places like the Delta town of Sunner, where a jury quickly acquitted two men of the murder of Emmett Till; Holly Springs, where an excavated slaves’ residence (which are quite rare, given the flimsy materials they were made of and the unfortable proximity to the town’s antebellum homes, their magnolia-and-nightlight tour guides, and underconstructed Confederate remnants; and Montgomery, home to the new National Memorial for Peace and Justice, the first site dedicated to marking the memory of hundreds of victims of lynching. There is a particular focus on Oxford, the university town at the center of the civil rights movement. Like much of what Neiman surveys, reenactment at Ole Miss is a mixed bag. Student groups are politically active, leading the charge that got the school to stop displaying the state flag (an especially trolsme decision in the eyes of Mississippi Republicans, who, comically, like to talk about Oxford as the Berkeley of Dixie). Yet the “contextualization” efforts to address the Johnny Reb statue and to mark James Meredith’s integration of the school in 1962 have been less successful, and many Greeks and alumni are indifferent at best when not hostile or volatile.

Neiman acknowledges both the limits and possibilities inherent in her comparative endeavor: “Seen in one light, the differences between German and American racist histories are glaring. Seen in another, what’s clear is what the similarities can teach us about guilt and atonement, memory and oblivion, and the presence of the past in preparing for the future.” Most of her interlocutors here and abroad remain skeptical or find the future of Confederate monuments, most consecrated a half-century after the Civil War, living over Learning from the Germans. Neimanhails New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu’s 2017 speech concerning the removal of several statues “for its clarity and eloquence.” But she notes that not long after his speech, Alabama’s joint Mississippi in banning the “disfigurement” of monuments, memorial streets, and buildings “located on public property for more than forty years.”

Robert Musolino noted that the thing about monuments is that one does not notice them. “There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument.” Until, of course, they can’t be unnoticed any longer, when the claims that monuments make on collective memory interest: with political action. Art historian Robert Coles notes: “In New York: Revolution to Reenactment traces the curiously ambiguous of a monument celebrated: historized for its destruction: the massive gilded equestrian statue of King George III, erected in New York in 1770 and hacked to pieces in 1776. Melted down for bullets— one source gives the incredibly precise number of 42,088—the statue, or better, its demise, has become mythologized as a national primal scene. Yet it’s a story reenacted in obscenity, beginning with the fate of the sculptor’s decapitated head, which loyalists somehow secreted back to England before its eventual disappearance.

No less obscure is the painter whose canvas Pulling Down the Statue of King George III, 1832–33, most fed in public memory the moment horse and king tumbled down: Johannes Adam Simon Oertel, an émigré from Bavaria displayed like so many others by the numb of 1848. “It was executed,” Bellion notes, “by a newly arrived German immigrant unfamiliar with American history; it was an outlier in the artist’s oeuvre (Oertel later specialize in animal and religious paintings); and it was neither exhibited nor purchased at the time of its creation. There is little in the painting’s early history to explain the renown it would subsequently command.” Oertel painted at a moment when a German-born immigrant artist like Emanuel Leutze could cause the work most powerfully associated with the War of Independence, Washington Crossing the Delaware (1851), and when revolutionary allegories found an enthusiastic reception among New York’s German-speaking exiles. (The German-New Yorker Wendel Bell’s Karikatur, inspired as a European correspondent for Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune.) Oertel’s canvas showed black and American Indian ooskisk; in prints made for mass consumption in the years to follow, these figures were edited out, leaving the war the cause of the Colonial Revival movement, which repurposed the context of Oertel’s gesture. The fate of the royal equestrian statue and of the Bavarian immigrant’s painting reminds us that the history of public monuments is not seen in stone. Yet another thing learned from the Germans.

Eric Banks is the director of the New York Institute for the Humanities at NYU.