In *Learning from the Germans*, Susan Neiman compares Germany’s atonement for the Holocaust with the U.S. reckoning over slavery

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When the American philosopher Susan Neiman told her German friends that her new book would favourably compare Germany’s efforts to atone for the Holocaust with the United States’ failure to reckon with the legacies of slavery, and that it would be called *Learning from the Germans*, almost all of them burst out laughing. Except for one, who yelled at her.

To her German friends, it seemed somehow shameful, and shameless, to think that their national reckoning – which many view as too late and nowhere near complete – could be held up as a model of anything. After the book was published, her friend and fellow philosopher Bettina Stangneth sent her a note: “Thank you for the copy of the book. My heart stops when I see the title.”

But Neiman, who is the director of the Einstein Forum in Berlin, drew hope from their bewilderment. “As far as I’m concerned, they really just prove my point,” she says. “There would be something paradoxical and vulgar about Germans going around saying, ‘Didn’t we do such a great job atoning for Auschwitz?’ ”

Sitting on a sofa in her book-lined apartment in Berlin’s Neukolln neighbourhood, Neiman contemplates all the people who might take exception to her book. Chief among them will be Germans, when it is published in their language next year, but also Americans, who view any comparison between the Holocaust and the legacies of slavery as tendentious. Neiman has won crucial support for that comparison, however: Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt, in a New York Times review, called the book “fascinating,” and “important and welcome.”

“My focus is on comparative redemption,” Neiman says, “not comparative evil.”

She may be uniquely positioned to make such an assessment, and not just because she’s the author of the celebrated study *Evil in Modern Thought*. Neiman was raised in Atlanta during a time of segregation, raised by a mother whose work in the civil-rights movement earned her death threats. When Neiman moved to Berlin in 1982 to study the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, she was “often the first Jew many Germans had met.”
At the time, Germans had just begun the painful process of Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung, or “working off the past.” Since then, more than a billion dollars has been spent on monuments to victims of the Holocaust; Berlin alone is home to 423 such memorials. When Neiman walks the streets of Berlin, she is as likely as a tourist to trip over stolpersteine, the stumbling stones that mark the places where Jews were snatched from their homes during the Nazi reign. Displaying Nazi symbols and denying the Holocaust are outlawed in Germany, and hate speech is strictly proscribed. The lessons of the 1930s are larded through school curricula, plays, books and films. Incidents of anti-Semitism are condemned from the top, and the popularity of the far-right Alternative For Germany party is a subject of national hand-wringing.

For three years, Neiman travelled through Germany and the U.S. South, primarily Mississippi, to study the ways the two countries had grappled with historical atrocities that resonate to this day. The very short answer is that one country has done a lot and the other has barely begun. The very centre of Berlin has a Holocaust memorial, she notes, but the United States has no national slavery museum, no prominent memorial to the Middle Passage.

As Neiman points out in her book, African-Americans have made pointed connections between the Holocaust and slavery, from James Baldwin to Medgar Evers to Bryan Stevenson, the author of the memoir Just Mercy and founder of the National Lynching Memorial. Stevenson tells her that Americans need to feel the same sense of national shame about the post-Reconstruction “age of racial terror” that Germans do about the Nazi era: “Without shame, you don’t actually correct. You don’t do things differently. You don’t acknowledge.”

As Neiman travelled through Mississippi, her native country was rocked by the presidency of Donald Trump, and a painful debate over what to do with monuments that valorized a war to maintain slavery. The issue of public memory is fraught and the United States has only begun to debate its importance. Perhaps there could be a historical museum of Confederate statues, she says, where children are shown the military men who were once lionized. “I think some things should be renamed, but I certainly don’t think you should wipe out all the traces, because then how can you learn from them? But there needs to be thoughtful solutions of the kind that took place in Germany.”

Those solutions may be on the horizon in the United States, a prospect that surprises her. She likens her country to a drug addict that had to reach bottom before seeking help, with the presidency of Trump – she can barely bring herself to say his name – representing the nadir. “The obviousness of his evil – I use the word ‘evil’ cautiously, but I use it for him – has, I think, sent Americans into a self-examination of our history that people were not willing to do three years ago. The words ‘white supremacy’ were not being used in mainstream media three years ago.”

She is heartened by the fact that issues such as reparations have moved from the fringes to the centre of political discussion. And, tentatively, she’s hopeful the country’s political direction will swing in 2020. She says, “as a Kantian, I believe we have an obligation to hope. We’re not allowed to resign. Morality requires that we believe as much as we can believe in order to act hopefully.”
I ask if Neiman can ever picture moving back to the States, and she shrugs. It seems unlikely. She left Germany in 1988, not long after a nursery teacher had said of her son: “If I’d known he was Jewish, I wouldn’t have taken him.” The teacher wasn’t being hostile, she says: “It was meant as an offering. It was meant as, ‘I don’t know how to deal with this stuff.’”

Germans, individually and as a society, were still in the early phases of Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung. Neiman decided to pack up and move to the United States to take a teaching position at Yale, leaving Germany to sort through its process of atonement. “I thought there was no way my son could have a normal life in this country, and at the time, it was probably true.” She moved her family to Israel for several years to teach philosophy at Tel Aviv University, before returning to Berlin in 2000 to take over the Einstein Foundation, a centre for philosophical and political discussion.

The city she moved back to was radically changed, multicultural and bustling 10 years after unification. In 2005, in the tourist-clogged heart of Berlin, a huge memorial to the Holocaust by architect Peter Eisenman was opened. Today, Germany is still wrestling with its ghosts – with the rise of the Alternative For Germany, with anti-Semitism, racism, and the integration of migrants.

The fight is often in the headlines. I ask Neiman if she’s heard about the amusement park in southern Germany where a new spinning ride caused shock because it looked like flying swastikas. The owner immediately shut the ride down. “No, I hadn’t heard that,” she says. “But it doesn’t surprise me at all.”