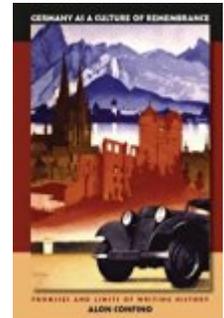


**Alon Confino.** *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance: Promises and Limits of Writing History.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 336 pp \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-5722-9.



**Reviewed by** Fergal Lenehan

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Alon Confino's book, *Germany As A Culture of Remembrance*, is a collection of eleven historical essays some of which have already been published in journals such as 'History and Memory' and 'The American Historical Review'. It consists of a 'Prologue' termed 'The Historian's Representations', a theoretical and methodological meditation on the craft of the historian, as well as five essays dealing with the theme of 'Heimat' and five dealing broadly with themes of 'memory'. The book represents Confino's conviction of the historian as being "a hedgehog, a fox, an ogre, and a traveling juggler all folded into one" (Preface, XIV) - as knowing intimately the ins and outs of his or her specific subject, while also understanding the broader historical framework of the society being studied, as a traveler who moves deftly between pasts, societies and disciplines, while also being able to juggle these elements differently in any given interpretation. Confino's book is a historical tour-de-force in which he displays the adroit touch of the imagined historian he himself espouses.

In the Prologue Confino outlines what he sees as the "three concentric circles of influence" which go into the molding of a historical narrative, namely the personal, the public and the professional. He then outlines the concentric circles of influence with regard to the writing of his own historical narratives - his background as an Israeli of Italian-Jewish origin, the rise of memory as a tool for explaining identity, as well as the Holocaust as the fundamental event in modern Judeo-Christian civilization, and the rules and modes of operation of the historical craft used to understand the past, despite the personal and public bias of the historian. He sees history writing as a dialectic between these three elements, while also understanding the historical discipline as a "crucial but insufficient (way) to understand the past", as some experiences "can only be captured by artistic representations" (Prologue, p 8). Yet, he also sees history as a form of art, as historians can never achieve the precision of, for example, mathematicians, as they always work with words, which are "potentially unstable" (p 12). Historical understanding is "always complex, incomplete, and still under construction" (p 13). Confino's re-

flective essay on the craft of the historian, while not, perhaps, particularly new, possesses an intense intellectual honesty with regard to the limits and accomplishments of historical writing and underpins the innovative approach to the essays that follow it.

The first main section of essays deals with the topic of 'Heimat' as an accessible metaphor with which one locally conceived the abstract notion of nationhood. It includes an essay on 'Heimat' during the post-unification period until 1918, after 1945 in both German states, a study of the idea in Edgar Reitz's television series of the same name, as well as an essay in which Confino concentrates upon the common elements of 'Heimat' during the different periods. His temporal and methodological range is impressive as he utilizes a vast array of sources including: documents from numerous 'Heimat' museums and associations, Reitz's television series, literature from various tourist organizations, East German political poster campaigns and postcards. He thus veers away from the more usual literary sources. Yet, his approach is still very much a history of the idea of as represented from above, an approach he is later critical of in relation to memory. In spite of that, and also noting that a historian can only write in accordance with the available sources without veering towards mere speculation, Confino engages in an interesting and wholly convincing discussion of 'Heimat', in which it is seen as representing the interchangeability between the locality, the region and the nation "through an interlocking network of symbols and representations in which the nation appeared local and locality national" (p 26).

It is really in the last five essays concerning memory, especially in the last two, where Confino truly excels. These essays deal with ideas of 'normality', dissonance and the meaning of tourism in post-World War Two West Germany as a means for allowing Germans to relate to the Nazi period and pre-War years in multiple ways. One question acts here as a mental springboard: "Why did

tourism activists revive tourism so quickly after defeat?" The answer that Confino suggests, through his study of tourist discourse, is that West Germans "made tourism a medium to consider the nation an innocent victim of war and occupation" (p 219).

Although Confino's two final essays are highly speculative and at times, perhaps, methodologically problematic, (which he freely and openly admits himself, calling one of his essays a "thought experiment" in which 'normality' and dissonance are taken as "experimental variables" (p 217)), his work here offers an interesting and innovative approach to memory studies in which he looks at the fascinating connection between traveling and memory. He eschews the usual approach to memory, which concentrates upon representational sources, by focusing upon tourism and notions of a return to 'normality', and argues for a history of sensibilities of normality and relative happiness which traces values and beliefs across the signposts of political history, rather than dealing with post-war artifacts especially constructed in order to represent the Nazi past. Yet he himself also uses representational sources, including literature and autobiography, when making his argument. But this is merely a small and relatively unimportant inconsistency in what two thoroughly convincing, if exploratory, essays.

For those of us slightly frustrated by the, undoubtedly necessary, inconclusive nature of Confino's "thought experiment", the good news is, according to the website of the University of Virginia, where Confino works in the History Department, that his present 'work in progress' is entitled 'Pleasures in Germany: The Culture of Traveling under Nazism, Communism and Liberal Democracy, 1933- 1989'. We can only wait with bated breath.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

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