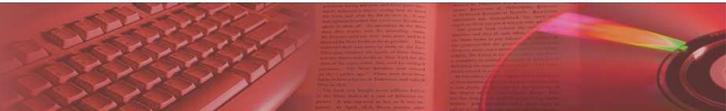
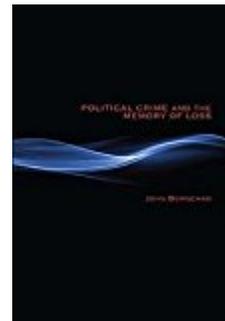


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John Borneman. *Political Crime and the Memory of Loss.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. xiii + 243 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22351-7; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35689-5.



Reviewed by David A. Messenger

Published on H-Memory (December, 2012)

Commissioned by Catherine Baker

Using political anthropology as his guide, John Borneman in his most recent book sets out to identify political crime and look at how societies deal with its aftermath in a variety of settings. Although primarily dealing with states, he notes too that political crime is broader, considering the perpetrators to be “actors or institutions in circumstances they designate as specifically political” (p. vii). Loss is defined broadly as well, and connected with accountability, the settling of account either in relation to the specific loss or, later, the settling of accounts with the memory of the loss. With these beginning definitions, Borneman compares a case of long duration, that of Germany, the memory of World War II and the Holocaust, and the former East German Communist regime, with that of a short-duration case, that of Lebanon following the Civil War (1975-90) and the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah.

In addition to the value of Borneman’s fieldwork in both these countries, the strength of this book comes in the first section, where the author successfully develops a number of important models and theories that can be usefully used by many scholars who study memory. He examines the modes of accountability, distinguishing between events meant to provide closure (apologies, trials, truth commissions, compensation mechanisms) from

those meant to become repetitive rites of commemoration (museums, memorials, etc.). In the case of Germany, he finds a “pluralization” of such commemorative sites in order to ward off charges of forgetting and the passing of more specific attempts at redress, such as compensation (p. 24). In Lebanon, by contrast, there have been few events of closure, given the general amnesty for war crimes granted at the end of the civil war, but there are nonetheless numerous sites of commemoration, such as prison museums developed after Israel ended its occupation of southern Lebanon at the beginning of the 2000s. Borneman’s comparisons between modes of accountability is extremely fruitful, and the discussion in chapter 3 of Willy Brandt’s 1970 apology to Poland for the Holocaust is very interesting. Here, Borneman argues that, despite West Germany’s numerous efforts since the 1950s to provide the State of Israel and individual victims with monetary compensation, there was still a need for the cathartic moment provided by Brandt. He then moves to consider the many Vindication Commissions in the former East Germany that were meant to provide compensation to victims of the Stasi. The conclusion is that, while one mode of accountability is compensation, compensation alone is not sufficient. Neither, however, will it disappear in favor of other ones.

By contrast, Borneman argues, democracy and thus accountability after loss—which for Borneman is essentially a democratic process—have been limited by the continued occupation of Lebanon (by Israel, Syria, and UN peacekeeping forces) after its civil war, and by the emergence of sectarian violence and Hezbollah. Examining both local and international dynamics, he outlines why war crimes charges after the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war were not pursued. Yet that does not mean that sites of memory have not emerged. He examines a number of prison and massacre sites in Lebanon that relate to the longer Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon (1978-2000). Unlike acts of performative redress, like truth commissions or trials, museum sites seek to prolong the loss: “victims of terror make demands that we automatically empathize with their losses” (p. 109). Yet such identification, in Borneman’s view, is not automatic, and understanding the fuller context is required. The greatest threat is when one side uses its suffering as a pretext to injure others. Although sites of memory are important in the case of Lebanon, Borneman is persuasive in arguing that in this case sites of memory have not served as modes of accountability in the same way they have in Germany.

The first section of this book is impressive, and gives the reader a lot of theoretical material and fieldwork from these two societies to consider. The next two sections, however, are not as well organized and the book suffers as a result. Many of these pieces were previously published, and simply do not work as a collection when put together here. The theme of the second section is regime change and the export of democracy, and the emphasis here is on the U.S. occupation of Iraq from 2003 onward. Borneman makes useful comparisons with the Allied occupation of Germany after World War II and the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon after 1978, considering how the German acceptance of defeat after the Second World War might prove to be a model. Here he posits that the refusal to accept defeat does not allow for the memory of loss to be internalized within individuals or

the larger collective. He turns to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to demonstrate this. While the individual arguments are definitely thought provoking, the movement from Germany and Lebanon in the first section to the United States, Iraq, and Israel-Palestine in the second is abrupt and not as well developed as it could have been. In the third and final section of the book, Borneman further extends his reach in outlining some thoughts on the meaning of democratization, arguing that for much of the recent past, at least until the 2011 Arab Spring, elections were only secondarily about democratization. Egypt under Hosni Mubarak is one example, especially in the 2000s. From here, Borneman turns to other ways of assessing democratization and how it shows up in societies, examining the famous (or infamous) apolitical Love Parade event held annually in Germany, and assessing the integration or lack of integration of Muslim minorities in contemporary Europe. In this section, the twin themes of political crime and memory of loss grow distant, and the tone of the book clearly changes to democratization, its varieties, and its discontents. While important points are made within each chapter, the flow of the book as a whole suffers as the primary themes from the first half of the book fall by the wayside.

Borneman has produced an important book, and his discussion of modes of accountability and their significance in assessing and comparing political crimes and their ongoing memory is very useful. What the book really is, however, is a collection of Borneman’s thoughts on this and other topics linked to democratization and contemporary history. In terms of memory studies, the first half is superb, providing scholars with an excellent framework for comparative research around ideas of accountability, performative redress, and rites of commemoration. In the last half of the book, the focus is on democratization, regime change, and democratic authority. While Borneman has many fascinating insights into these topics, this part of the book will be less useful for those looking specifically for approaches to the study of memory.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-memory>

Citation: David A. Messenger. Review of Borneman, John, *Political Crime and the Memory of Loss*. H-Memory, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37385>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.