It would be difficult to find a sociologist or historian who knows more than Jeffrey Olick about the post-Second World War German debate concerning the meaning of the nation’s past for its present. Olick is a leading figure in the interdisciplinary field of memory studies and author of several important books and articles on this topic. *The Sins of the Fathers: Germany, Memory, Method*, which one can (almost) safely assume will be his last in this rich vein, covers much of the same ground as such earlier works as *In the House of the Hangman: The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943–1949* (2005) and *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (2007).

While building on and often referring to these and other of his earlier writings, the aim in this new book is a bit different. Olick’s current concern is to offer a more formalized grounding for memory studies, by way of extrapolating an explicitly rendered analytical framework from a detailed presentation of the speeches and other public expressions of representative figures in postwar German political culture. The audience addressed appears to be analytically minded sociologists, while the book at the same time attempts to hold the attention of historians. This is a tough task that at times makes for a difficult read. As Olick himself explains in the closing chapter, he wrote several versions of this book, testing various formats and starting points in the attempt to deal with these multiple tasks and contentious audiences.

The book divides into five parts and 19 chapters. An introductory section situates Germany within the general framework of what the author identifies as the sociology of collective memory. As perhaps the leading sociologist to concern himself with collective memory, Olick has wide ambitions here, as he wants not only to discuss the problematic concept of collective memory, but also to open a path to “a cultural sociology of retrospection.” The main concern of the latter is “how what we say and do, as individuals and together, is shaped by a not often obvious and always changing combination of traditions, fantasies, interests, and opportunities“ (pp. 38–39). This, of course, is a central issue in sociology more generally, and making this point is part of the attempt to bring the study of collective memory—and thus memory studies—into the sociological mainstream.

This leads to a discussion of the conceptual grounding necessary for such a project, both as it concerns the role of the past in postwar German political debate and the various fractional viewpoints that make up American sociology. The notion of collective memory is key in this, as the concept has to be defended against complaints (by historians and sociologists) about its epistemological status and usefulness as an analytic tool. As he has done previously, Olick argues strongly for its value as he outlines a case for interpreting collective memory neither as cause nor consequence, but rather as a decisive aspect of those discursive processes (something done, rather than had) that shape individual and collective behavior.

Analyzing how the past was done in official discourse in postwar Germany is one of the book’s main strengths. To this end, Olick develops a narrative trajectory in which the catastrophic (traumatic?) memory of the war is projected and formative of three distinct epochs of recent German history: the “reliable nation” (1949 to the mid to late 1960s), the “moral nation” (1966 to 1975), and the “normal nation” (1975 through the 1980s). These form stages in the conscious

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attempt, largely directed by the United States, to guide Germany back into the western world community.

One of the most interesting insights of the book lies in revealing the complexities of the issue of collective guilt, the most central theme with reference to representations of the German past within these epochs. Throughout his detailed discussion, Olick shows how this complex issue can be addressed historically, as a social and political issue, as well as morally and philosophically. German political leaders, he argues, dealt with the idea of German collective guilt through “a combination of traditions, fantasies, interests, and opportunities” that began under American occupation and continued through the establishment of the new normal.

Parts Two, Three, and Four detail this process through representation and analysis of the speeches of leading politicians; here Olick comes into his own, with a discussion that is rich in historical detail. The final part, titled “Conclusions,” consists of two essays. The first, “Epilogues: Berlin is not Bonn,” moves the discussion of the history of German memory to post-1989 reunification and into the newly expanded and fundamentally transformed Federal Republic. The scope of analysis is also expanded to include elements of popular culture, such as the literary works of Günter Grass and W. G. Sebald and public debates between academics, including the American political scientist Daniel Goldhagen, as well as the well-known “history debate” among German intellectuals. The second essay of the concluding section is the previously mentioned “History, Memory, and Temporality,” an insightful set of reflections about how the past weighs on the present. It is addressed to professional sociologists, most particularly those concerned with historical sociology and memory studies.

As should be apparent, the author’s project is both ambitious and multidirectional. Any quarrel I might have is more with the book’s form than its content. It should be clear that this is a book rich in knowledge and insight, and with the more formal academic positions taken—the balance between Weber and Durkheim as filtered through Adorno, the choice of process over structural determinism, the importance of tradition and ritual in modern life, the significance given narrative (genre and theme), the centrality of time and historical context in interpreting actions and events—one can mostly agree. One could quibble with the narrow representation of cultural sociology, the rather off-hand dismissal of trauma theory, the self-sanitizing in choosing “dialogue” over “dialectic” in deference to American sensibilities and fear of “Marxism.” Of more substantial importance would be a suggestion to widen the arenas of memory covered to include “cultural memory,” which would involve adding a wide array of sources from popular culture in addition to or as a sometime alternative to the official memory covered in this book. Another would be to look for comparative cases, rather than alternative explanations, to investigate just how generalizable the conceptual framework developed here with reference to Germany actually is.

In the end, and given the author’s ambition, I would have preferred two separate volumes, one addressed to the professional audience and the other to a more general, historically interested reader. The best parts of the current book are those where the conceptual apparatus is relatively absent, unobtrusively guiding the narrative and the reader. If narrative matters in history writing, style and mode of presentation matter in sociological writing. Olick is at his best when he is deeply embedded in the material. Does memory studies need an elaborated framework? Does it need disciplinary legitimation? Perhaps; but what we need more are studies like those Olick has produced in the past and given us another taste of here.