

Tommaso Speccher, *Die Darstellung des Holocausts in Italien und Deutschland. Erinnerungsarchitektur– Politischer Diskurs – Ethik*, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), pp. 392.

by Aline Sierp

What do citizens experience when they get into contact with Holocaust memory? How important is the present while making those experiences? Which form of subjectivity is being presented and consumed in Holocaust memorial sites? Which political function do the national sites have on the European level? These are some of the main questions that Tommaso Speccher tries to tackle in his monograph *Die Darstellung des Holocausts in Italien und Deutschland. Erinnerungsarchitektur– Politischer Diskurs – Ethik* published in 2016 by Transcript. Tommaso Speccher's book is based on a PhD thesis defended in 2014 at the Free University in Berlin. Tommaso Speccher himself calls it a 'philosophical investigation of the representation of the Holocaust' (p.11). Indeed, the title would suggest an architectural study, however, the first pages already indicate clearly that Speccher understands architecture as a symbolic expression of something else. Starting from two concrete case studies (the Museo della Shoah in Rome and the Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas in Berlin) he combined extensive historical source analysis with anthropological investigations in order to enter wider reflections on the ethical implications of monumental memory practices.

The first chapter provides the reader with the theoretical framework that draws mainly from works by Hayden White, James L. Young, Dan Diner and Hans Blumberg as well as Theodor W. Adorno, Jacques Derrida, Hans Jonas and Yehuda Bauer. Speccher concentrates particularly on the difference between event and representation and sheds light on the historical, philosophical and political aspects present in the semantics and phenomenology of the Holocaust. The second chapter then dives into the actual case studies and provides a summary of the political and cultural context of the genesis of the two memorial sites in Italy and Germany. He covers the whole timespan from the immediate post-war years until our contemporary times in order to highlight the differences between the German and the Italian national histories. In doing so he sets the ethical-political way of confronting the past in Germany into direct comparison with the universalizing religious approach present in Italy.

The analysis of the German case on the basis of three concepts (namely ‘the question of guilt’, ‘stigma’ and ‘inscription’) is innovative and allows for a different way of structuring the investigation. Unfortunately, the author does not apply the same approach to the Italian case. Here the analysis is considerably shorter and only considers contemporary issues. The third chapter moves into the structural and philosophical relevance of the architectural discourse. Also here Speccher concentrates on the semantic differences expressed in the two memorial sites and analyses architecture as a sort of symbolic catalyst for the representation of the Holocaust. The chapter suffers from a similar problem to the previous chapter: it tries to compare two cases that are not easily comparable because of the very different availability of sources the author struggled with. It is evident that the author had a lot less material for the Italian case and thus had to resort to the discussion of other memorials instead of following the same structure as in the German case. The fourth chapter returns to the discourses presented in the first chapter and concentrates again on the political and philosophical core of the analysis and highlights the role that identity and subjectivity plays in the two memorial sites at hand. The declared aim of the analysis is to reach the ‘cultural core’ (p. 18) represented in the two memorial sites. Despite the fact that Speccher concentrates a lot on the political analysis, his real interest is clearly of a philosophical nature. He sees the Holocaust as an expression of the philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century rooted in Nihilism and argues that the confrontation with its memory can lead to a more ethical dealing with history.

The book is characterized by a rigid structure. Each chapter is divided into sub-chapters with a clear introduction and conclusion. Each chapter is closely interconnected. This helps the reader to follow the at times difficult philosophical reflections expressed in sophisticated – often over-ornate – language that is characterized by a number of omissions (quite a number of sentences are incomplete). Slightly irritating in this context is the introduction of a whole myriad of new questions in each chapter that do not seem to belong to the main analysis and that also remain without an answer. Clearly visible is also the fact that Speccher’s book is based on a PhD thesis: a lot of space is given to the justification of certain choices the author made and relatively little to the actual empirical analysis. The chapter where empirical analysis and theoretical reflections are best married is the one on architecture and memory. The clear connections present in the other chapters are missing, instead several

repetitions indicate that this chapter might have been published elsewhere already.

Despite the fact that Speccher's work offers a new take on Holocaust remembrance, his book suffers content-wise from a number of shortcomings. Speccher adopts a slightly problematic conflation of 'Museum' (museum) and *Gedenkstätte* [memorial site]. Even if both of his main case studies would fall into the former category, he refers to several memorial sites to illustrate his arguments without taking into account that the difference between a museum and a memorial site might account for the divergences observed. He furthermore describes the Holocaust as an event that was predominantly relevant for the western European and American world. He purposefully excludes Eastern Europe and the fact that the Holocaust has acquired universal meaning as a symbol for the break with civilization (see Levy and Sznajder 2002). This omission is particularly surprising considering that the author concentrates so much of his writing on the philosophical dimension of Holocaust memorialization. Not very convincing is also the argument that the difference between Germany and Italy can be explained by a difference in character (p. 118) which is mainly socio-political in Germany and theological-cultural in Italy. The focus on religion distracts the attention from some of the other reasons of socio-political nature that have caused the different developments in the two countries after 1945. Completely missing in this context is a discussion of the relationship between Italy and Germany – a topic that should have been a paramount element in a comparative study.

All in all Speccher's book offers a sophisticated philosophical reflection on the representation of the Holocaust that might be of interest to historically inclined philosophers but that suffers from too many empirical deficits to substantially add to the historical and political debate on Holocaust memorialization.

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