

Learning from the Germans: how we might atone for America's evils

Susan Neiman's new book offers a roadmap to reconciliation and startling similarities between the US and the Nazi state



In May 2017, workers prepare to take down a statue of former Confederate Gen Robert E Lee in New Orleans.

Michael Henry Adams
Sun 10 Nov 2019

Under the subtitle *Race and the Memory of Evil*, the philosopher Susan Neiman relates hard truths from which others shrink.

Her audacious work is a refreshing change from those, afraid to offend, who leave unsaid things that seem self-evident. Cages detaining refugees at the southern border are indeed “concentration camps”. The genocide of Native Americans and the captivity and exploitation of people of color are indeed America’s elemental outrage.

Nor is Neiman afraid to attribute inspiration for some of Hitler’s greatest horrors to some of America’s worst ideas. To the fledgling Führer, she notes, manifest destiny, eugenics and race-based laws seemed ideas worth pursuing.

A Jew born in segregated Atlanta, Neiman has lived and taught across the globe and now directs the Einstein Forum in Berlin. Immersion in such diversity seems only to have intensified an American characteristic: to question. Her distillation of five years' research produces a powerful tonic.

How did one fail to realize that more of the enslaved died in transit from Africa than did inmates at Auschwitz? Why did one never learn that only 522,000 Jews lived in Germany when the Nazis assumed power?

That £20m was granted by Britain's parliament as compensation to slaveowners in 1833 is common knowledge. But who knew that it was raised with private loans and accrued interest meant taxpayers did not finish paying it off until 2015?

Those who find the black experience much milder than Nazi mass murder are liable to think Neiman's juxtaposition of Germany and the US far-fetched. No matter. Side by side, she compares and contrasts both powers via their definitive episodes of evil.

On the one hand stands the 300-year history of the Middle Passage, black bondage and "slavery by other means". Its corollary is a dozen-year nightmare. Neiman does not posit an Olympics of suffering. She diminishes neither crime. Instead she reveals how far America lags behind Germany in reckoning with its sullied past.

Learning from the Germans contains good news: we too can undertake *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*: a working-off of the past.

What have Germans to teach us? One thing is that a quest for atonement, for recognition of shame, is not in itself shameful. Contrition, leading to reconciliation, need not "foul our nest". Nor, as neoliberals and nationalists warn, as National Socialists once threatened, will it encourage Bolshevism.

As with the fall of humankind in George Herbert's poem *Easter Wings*, our failures at justice offer an opportunity. Neiman insists the following are essential: admitting criminality, offering earnest apology and meaningful recompense for historic transgressions, embracing notions of Enlightenment-era universalism. All this is required to become our best selves, addressing the trauma of both victim and perpetrator.

Redressing disgrace offers a chance to be restored to respectful inclusion in the world community, to become whole. Or as Herbert puts it:

*Let me combine,
And feel thy victorie:
For, if I imp my wing on thine,*

Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

Examining each in defeat, Neiman was aghast to discover how alike Confederates and Nazis were. Each group of warriors, vanquished pursuing a “glorious cause”, had “only been following orders, defending their homes, family and friends”. Each determined that they and theirs had suffered most among millions murdered, maimed or harmed.

In Germany, “Denazification” was as loathed as the loyalty oath during Reconstruction. Following a slow start, East Germany outpaced West in “working-off the past”. Committed communists were eager to distinguish themselves from former countrymen they contended were still allied to the old regime. But in reality, Neiman shows, both governments, riddled with former Nazis, were still “morally myopic”. In the west, starting in the 1960s, rebelling youth started the work their parents and grandparents were unwilling to do.

Bucking public opposition, reparations were awarded to individuals, offering a precedent for American restitution for slavery. Meager and difficult to obtain, such payments were nonetheless an important beginning. More significantly, strategically, reparations were paid to Israel. For many in the Jewish state such “compensation” was anathema. For Germans, recalling Versailles, the concept seemed bitter.

Now, in Mississippi, white residents appear reluctant to acknowledge the brutal slayings designed to terrorize blacks after slavery fell. Wrong-headed voting laws still dilute the political power of a large African American population. Neiman spent half a year in Mississippi, she says, not because bias is unknown in the north. Rather, she knew that examining racism there would offer clarity to racism everywhere.

She was right. A century and a half after Reconstruction, this is a state that still eschews Medicaid expansion under Obamacare, a move which without costing locals a dime could benefit all who live in poverty. But the “good ole boys” do not view affordable healthcare as a right. Because it helps black people, it is denigrated as a government handout for “shiftless freeloaders”.

It’s not all bad. Decades after two white New Yorkers were martyred with a local black man as they sought to register African Americans to vote, the mastermind behind the lynching was brought to justice. Edgar Ray Killen was 80 when he was sentenced for the murders of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney.

On Tuesday, Jim Hood, the forthright Mississippi attorney general who led that landmark case, came within six points of being elected governor.

The struggle continues. Redemption awaits. But as Neiman's excellent book indicates, as George Herbert underlines, sometimes winning can only follow failure.