

**Rieff, David. 2011. *Against Remembrance*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.**

**Ben Wellings, Deputy-head of School and Convenor of European Studies, SPIR, ANU**

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It takes a brave man to speak out against remembrance these days. Journalist David Rieff has identified remembrance as one of the pieties of our age and in this slim volume seeks to think through an alternative means of creating and sustaining justice when dealing with past tragedies, atrocities and wrongs. Rieff poses the question that what if remembrance does not help create a good and just society, but that forgetting has its role too? Here he sets himself against the zeitgeist for public commemoration and argues that 'what ensures the health of societies and individuals alike is not their capacity for remembering but rather their capacity for *eventually* forgetting' (p.68-9).

Rieff speaks out in particular against memory as a type of morality. Rather than being a barometer of a good and reflective society, remembrance is politically pernicious and provides an individual curious about and moved by past events only with 'identification and psychological proximity, rather than historical accuracy let alone political depth' (p.19). 'The romance that is historical memory', writes Rieff 'is at best the candle that we light in honour of the dead and, at its worst, a kind of cognitive equivalent of an astrophysical black hole – a region from which no historical reason and no political sobriety can escape' (p.91).

Rieff is clearly frustrated with this type of justification for the growth in remembrance activities (state-sponsored or otherwise) in the past two decades. He rightly bemoans the facile justification for such activities that is usually attributed to George Santayana that 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it' (p.46). His own views are closer to those of Friedrich Nietzsche and Pierre Nora, both of whom he cites. For Nietzsche whichever historical interpretation prevails at a given time 'is a function of power, not truth' (p.51), whilst Nora suggests the de-politicising power of remembrance when he argues that 'memory instils remembrance within the sacred' (p.73) and hence beyond the reach of critical politics.

Here Rieff appeals to an enlightened citizenry (or its vanguard) to counteract the contemporary overvaluing of memory and remembrance at the expense of history. Unlike Nora, Rieff is more concerned about the politicising nature of remembrance and cites Israel (or more precisely Zionism) as 'the most florid example of how disastrous remembrance can be' (p.114), but he provides plenty of other examples: Northern Ireland, South Africa, the former Yugoslavia and parts of Latin America. In all of these conflicts and post-conflicts, 'remembrance is not just strengthened by grief but sustained by the sense of victimhood' (p.102).

Rieff is right in this. In post-conflict politics, greater legitimacy flows from being the victim than the perpetrator. Nor should we be surprised by his gloomy prognosis given his CV which saw him report on many of the conflicts noted above. Inevitably his views are conditioned by his experiences of the 1990s and although not to be denied, the argument is something of a “worst case scenario”. Much of what he says is broadly true, but might be more persuasive if expressed with slightly more nuance.

For example Rieff claims it is not possible to remember collectively as we only remember as individuals (p.58). However, recent conceptualisation suggest an ‘ecology of identity’ through which individuals negotiate a sense of individual self via the collective and structural boundaries of shared experience. Rieff himself also succumbs to a truism of the age, that ‘What is worth paying heed to is just how easy it turns out to be for nations to “revise” and “rewrite” their collective memories. That alone should signal to us how much closer historical memory is to myth on one side and contemporary politics and ideology on the other than it is to history’ (p.15). Without denying the important link between politics and remembrance, it turns out that revising and rewriting national history and collective consciousness is not all that easy after all and the process of such observable change cannot be reduced to the simple machinations of politics or publishing in history journals.

But what of the Australian condition? In Rieff’s writing Australia is most clearly paralleled with contemporary France. Unlike post-conflict nations, for countries that are at peace ‘the challenge is how to remember or, more precisely how to mobilise collective memory in an age of destabilised national identities’ (p.118). Such a comparative perspective is welcome as is the suggestion that Anzac is a form of avoidance (p.124), masking less easily digested histories in which Australians are not the brave victims but rather the dishonourable perpetrators, asking ‘is it really possible to celebrate ambivalence’ (p.124).

Pop psychology suggests that in order to come to terms with trauma we must remember it. Anzac is no longer about healing but about cohering; cohering a large-scale political community through annual rituals because the fear is that by doing nothing that community might dissipate. For Rieff, Kipling understood that the term ‘Lest We Forget’ had the horrible implication of ‘*when* we forget’ (p.9). This anxiety explains the continual emphasis on youth taking on the Anzac spirit as the diggers themselves fade away.

Rieff does a good job of provoking thought about remembrance. But where did all this remembrance come from? Are there structural reasons for all this remembrance or is it all down to political agency? The recent bout of remembrance concerning the centenary of the sinking of the *Titanic* only hints at what is to come in two years time when the ‘guns of August’ will be remembered and when the centenary of the Gallipoli landings will be commemorated. Will the strategic blunders be recalled to help formulate better policy, or will we be focused on the lives and deaths of individuals completely disassociated from the political contexts of their times?