

Claudia Leeb. *The Politics of Repressed Guilt: The Tragedy of Austrian Silence*. Edinburgh University Press 2018. 256 pp. \$125.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781474413244); \$29.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781474452182).

With *The Politics of Repressed Guilt: The Tragedy of Austrian Silence*, Claudia Leeb has written a brave and important book. Throughout the book's 248 pages, Leeb analyzes Austria's conspicuously absent public conversation regarding its willing participation in World War II. Unlike other countries that have encouraged reflection upon a guilty past, Austria has until recently maintained a deafening silence regarding its participation in the war and its often-proactive involvement in Nazi war crimes. Leeb seeks to explain the crippling, honed defense mechanisms that have prevented this topic from becoming public, and offers a compelling argument as to why Austrian society has resisted speaking about its collective feelings of guilt. In confronting this lacuna, she asks why Austria has not engaged in what she terms 'embodied reflective judgments' that demand both critical thinking and empathic feeling. Because critical thinking and empathic feelings are equally important to her framework, Leeb draws largely on the works of Hannah Arendt, who emphasizes thinking, and Theodor Adorno, who emphasizes feeling. Embodied reflective judgment cannot privilege either component over the other in order for denied guilt to be adequately addressed, she contends; moreover, if feelings of culpability remain unaddressed, 'they can be reactivated to continue the cycle of violence' (2).

An Austrian scholar trained in political theory and psychoanalysis, Leeb is the ideal candidate to treat this difficult topic. Having grown up in Austria and attended university there, she has personal experience of Austria's unwillingness to confront the past and provides a firsthand account of her shocking discovery of her homeland's perpetrator status. Indeed, it was not until she enrolled in a course at the University of Vienna that she first encountered the question of suppressed Austrian guilt, for one assignment involved interviewing her grandparents about their memories of World War II. Years later, having earned two Ph.Ds, she began researching court documents and pursuing archival research that further opened her eyes to the extent of Austria's involvement in the war. 'The sweat running down my face ... was not only due to the summer heat,' she writes about her perusal of these documents, but 'also the result of the horror I felt about learning in more detail about the crimes perpetuated by Austrians during the Nazi regime and the places where such crimes were perpetuated—some of them buildings not too far from where I used to live in Vienna, and walked by, unsuspecting, when attending the University of Vienna' (12). Leeb's firsthand experience and intimate involvement with her topic lends the book a compelling emotional tenor, infusing its theoretical analysis with a personal narrative and emotional immediacy that brings it to life. The reader senses a weight and urgency behind Leeb's writing, and one can imagine that her careful research and application of both political and psychoanalytic theory proved cathartic.

Notwithstanding this personal dimension, the book is carefully researched and convincingly argued. Leeb delves deeply into the hows and whys of ongoing Austrian defense mechanisms, providing empirical evidence that corroborates her claims about the nation's unwillingness and inability to confront its criminal past. At the heart of it all lies a deep-seated denial of one's status as a perpetrator nation and ongoing belief that Austria itself was victimized by the war; whether caused by Arendt's assertion that the war resulted in a breakdown in critical thinking, or Adorno's claim that it delivered a breakdown in empathic feeling, the net result is an unwillingness to admit one's proactive involvement in state terrorism. Leeb identifies three major mechanisms of defense that characterize Austrian denial: DARVO, Denial of abuse, Attack on those claiming abuse, and

Reversal of Victim and Offender roles; moral disengagement; and overidentification with the collective. The first describes a perpetrator's inability to admit offense; instead, the guilty party presents *itself* as the victim of unfortunate circumstances and stronger wills. Subsequently, it goes on the offensive against any claim to the contrary, often elaborately and aggressively. The second mechanism describes the facility with which euphemisms and clinical language shield one from guilt: 'mercy killings' and 'final solution,' for instance, take the place of 'murder,' and thus absolve the perpetrator of a heinous crime. Because those involved in executing war crimes were professionals of various kinds, they easily resorted to euphemistic language pertinent to their field; doctors, for instance, claimed that mass murder helped people 'peacefully sleep across.' Finally, overidentification with the collective disburdens the individual from taking responsibility for his or her actions; rather, it is the nation state, the political party, the weight of history ('one had to have been there'), and obligation to the family that allows individuals to deny the personal choice that went into their wartime activities. Here, Leeb successfully builds upon Arendt's famous statement regarding the 'banality of evil' and offers examples of persons who excuse their past behavior out of duty to the collective: they were just following orders, just earning a living, just trying to not get arrested.

Together, these defense mechanisms allow guilty parties to sustain a narrative of collective innocence and even claim victimization. Between Germany's annexation of Austria in the Anschluss, the directives from above to support the persecution of Jews, Roma, and Sinta, and the claim that under Hitler the nation rebounded economically to a status worthy of Austria's heritage, many citizens still engage in a deep denial that prevents confrontation with its past. 'By aiming to display how Austrians suffered,' Leeb writes, 'one aims to fend off the feelings of guilt about the fact that the leading doctors and scientists in the Nazi terror machine were Austrians' (194). Leeb's extensive use of inverted commas throughout the book clearly designates a desire to distance herself from this reigning narrative while also suggesting that it is indeed rich in falsehood and denial. She writes, for instance, that Nazi doctors used 'applied research,' that the mentally ill incapable of work were categorized as leading 'unlivable lives,' that Roma and Sinti are 'gypsies' whose biological data emanate from 'natural differences,' and that those striving to voice their opposition to Austria's silence are potential 'dictators.'

The book is carefully organized into five chapters and a conclusion that approaches the topic from a variety of angles. Leeb draws not only on extensive archival research of official documents, but also analyses of cultural events that show the magnitude of resistance to an admission of guilt. One example is the public outcry over the staging of Thomas Bernhard's play, *Heldenplatz*, in 1988. This play's title refers to the public square in Vienna where Hitler was welcomed by throngs of cheering Austrians in 1938. Fifty years later, Bernhard sought to challenge the prevalent narrative of Austrian victimization by telling the story of a Jewish family that returns to Vienna after years in exile. The reality of ongoing anti-Semitism and memories of Austrian support for Hitler prove unbearable for the family, however. The play ends when the mother can no longer suppress the memory of cheering crowds welcoming fascism and she collapses onto a table. The fierce public outcry against Bernhard's play and anger against the theater that allowed its performance again demonstrates a public unwillingness to confront the topic. Leeb is expert at identifying the deep-seated defense mechanisms that lie buried in their outrage: the claim that Bernhard distorts the truth, for instance, covers *their own* distortion of the truth; the accusation that Bernhard's play displays unimaginable offense displaces *their own* knowledge that Austria itself committed unimaginable offenses. Moreover, the fervor that this play elicited is itself indicative of the repression at work, for such collective outrage clearly indicates that a nerve has been struck.

Another angle from which Leeb examines her topic involves an effort to open a museum of history intended to commemorate the past. Unlike other nations, including Germany, that have Holocaust museums designed to confront their painful history, Austria resisted opening such a museum until after the completion of Leeb's book in 2017. Although proposals to do so were offered several times, efforts to derail this endeavor were successful until only recently, and the Museum of Austrian History finally opened in 2018. As with her analysis of Bernhard's play, Leeb's training in psychoanalysis serves her well as she scrutinizes the denial that sustains the dangerous silence. Indeed, the resistance to opening a 'house of history' for her produced nothing short of 'absurd reactions' (180). For instance, Leeb brilliantly analyzes the effort to prevent the museum's opening which centered around the display of old musical instruments. Critics vehemently argued that, were the museum opened, a collection of old instruments would have to be moved to a different floor, and insisted this disruption presented an unnecessary hardship. Leeb recognizes the analogy between resisting this move and the denial of Austrian war crimes, since moving instruments to a different floor stands analogous to engaging a different level of the psyche and thus 'moving' repressed feelings of guilt. She deftly identifies the metaphoric meanings that infuse the argument about instruments: 'what is at stake here (are) attempts to hinder another movement – the movement of repressed feelings of guilt from the unconscious to ... consciousness' (180). As with the chapter devoted to Bernhard's *Heldenplatz*, the discussion of the museum greatly enriches Leeb's book and underscores the reality of Austria's ongoing struggle with its past. While the reader wonders somewhat about the aftermath and resolution of these events—what did reviewers say after the play opened? How did the museum finally come to be opened?—their inclusion in the book broadens the scope of Leeb's perspective and deepens her analysis.

The Politics of Repressed Guilt represents an amazing achievement and fills a critical void in the existing literature. It will be of interest to anyone interested in political theory, psychoanalysis, modern European history, Jewish Studies, and genocide. It is beautifully written, well argued, and a pleasure to read despite its weighty, challenging topic.

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