



Image: Marko Priske, *Field of Stelae*, Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin

A CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE?

BY ANDREAS POHL

Can Australia learn from Germany's notion of *Erinnerungskultur* to confront our genocidal past?

1

After a 20-hour flight from Melbourne to Frankfurt and a one-hour train ride, my daughter and I stepped out onto the forecourt of the main station in Würzburg, the German town in which I grew up. It had been four years since I last visited, pre-pandemic, and the place had changed. A new public sculpture had been erected: an array of suitcases, rucksacks, carry-bags and bed rolls rendered in stone, ceramic and wood, strewn across a large area on the wide footpath leading into the city. The luggage seemed to have been abandoned by its owners in a hurry.

Information boxes provided the context. The sculpture was a memorial for the more than 2000 Jewish citizens of my hometown and the surrounding region who were deported to concentration camps between 1941 and 1944 by the Nazis and their helpers. Less than 100 survived. Looking at the memorial, I felt shame, sorrow and pride. Shame at the crimes my country, my ancestors, had committed. Sorrow for the innocent victims of an inhumane regime. Pride that we were able to publicly acknowledge the crimes of the past, even at this local level.

2

The Germans have two names for their way of dealing with the twelve years of National-Socialist rule and the Holocaust: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and *Erinnerungskultur*. They roughly describe the

same idea of keeping the memory of the crimes of the Nazis alive and commemorating their victims as a warning about the dangers of again sliding into inhumanity.

The two terms, though, carry a subtle difference in meaning. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is often translated as coping with the past, or overcoming the past. The Jewish-American philosopher and director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam near Berlin defines it as ‘working-off’ the past. The term seems to imply that if a country works hard enough at remembering, the crimes and the trauma of genocide can be overcome and neutralised. I prefer the word *Erinnerungskultur*, or culture of remembrance, which conveys the idea that the memory of this particular part of Germany’s past needs to be permanently woven into both its political and its everyday culture.

3

In the same year that my daughter and I visited Germany, I received a letter from our local council in Australia announcing that they were planning to change the name of our municipality and inviting us to vote for a new one. After long consultations with the descendants of the original people of the land, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung, three options were chosen.

Our local government area had been named by Scottish landowner Farquhar McCrae in the first half of the nineteenth century after the slave plantation his father ran in Jamaica, and officially became the City of

Moreland by State Government decree in 1994. Twenty-eight years later the public voted for the new name of Merri-bek, the Indigenous word for ‘stony country’. The name change was hailed by the mayor as ‘reconciliation in action’.

And yet, while pleased to be living in an area named by its local original inhabitants and not after a slave owner, I also feel that the reasoning behind the change falls short. As objectionable as the landowner’s familial connection to the slave trade in a far-away country is, the re-naming process seems still comfortably removed from the colonial realities of enslavement and dispossession in Australia. The new name is like having your cake and eating it too. It disguises the fact that the land on which I live was unlawfully taken from its original owners. Virtually everyone finds slavery abhorrent, but by comparison, the dispossession and attempted genocide of First Nations people still doesn’t attract the same unequivocal condemnation.

Public admission of land theft might have been politically too difficult at this local level, but to give the Merri-bek Council its due, it has also taken other steps towards meaningful reconciliation, first and foremost by declaring 26 January, which commemorates the date of the first British settlement at Sydney Cove, a day of mourning and refusing to hold citizenship ceremonies on that date.

4

All of this is far removed from when I arrived from Cold War Germany as a 25-year-old migrant in Australia in the late 1980s. Then I found a country where people my age lived in the present and looked to the future. There was the afterglow of national celebrations of 200 years of white settlement; multiculturalism was new and exciting; and the country was turning away from its traditional ties with Europe towards Asia.

To me, Australia felt liberating. Born in the 1960s, I had grown up, as it was once put by the respected weekly *Die Zeit*, ‘within earshot of the Holocaust’. Germany was a country where many of the Nazi generation were still alive and in positions of authority as teachers, public servants

and journalists. In Australia, nothing and nobody seemed to be weighed down by the burden of history; no one seemed to be compelled to judge events based on the past.

I know now that this was a superficial understanding, based on my being an ignorant new arrival. But it wasn’t just me who was ignorant about the past. My partner, who went to a supposedly progressive state school in the 1970s, was taught that Indigenous people were mainly killed by the flu. In the 1990s we all started to learn about the Border Wars, the massacres, the Stolen Generations. It was a national conversation brought on by the momentous Mabo decision by the High Court and the subsequent Native Title Act, both of which abolished the convenient colonial and postcolonial legal fiction of *terra nullius*, of land belonging to nobody.

But we also learnt about the right-wing backlash to this kind of history—a virulent and often vicious denial waged in the Murdoch press and other conservative media outlets. The ugly term ‘black armband history’, first coined by conservative historian Geoffrey Blainey, was taken up by conservative prime minister John Howard during these so-called history wars as a catch-all attack on anyone questioning the triumphalist version of white settlement. The view that colonisation was also an attempted genocide, the shame of it, seemed to be intolerable.

5

For a German it is always difficult to discuss another country’s genocidal past. The suspicion that the purpose of doing so is to question the singularity of the Holocaust and thus diminish the guilt of its perpetrators is ever-present. Historical analogies are a distortion at best, and there is no comparison between Australia’s failings as a nation and Germany’s. But while genocidal pasts are distinct to each country, there are surprising echoes in how the generations that follow deal with it.

In Germany, *Erinnerungskultur* is carried out mainly by the generation of the perpetrators’ grandchildren. The Second World War ended almost eighty years ago, but the vast majority of memorials and the creation of days of remembrance have occurred in the last three decades.



Image: Memorial sculpture by Matthias Braun, Wuerzburg. Photo by Thomas Obermeier.

Prior to that there was silence, in the childlike belief that if you ignored it the historical monster of the Holocaust would simply disappear; when this became untenable, many switched to minimising their involvement ('We did not know'; 'There was nothing we could have done') or casting themselves in the role of also-victim ('It was war. We all suffered'). It fell to the generations that came of age during the 1968 student rebellion and after to confront the uncomfortable truth of what their forebears had done.

As a migrant to Australia, I could observe a similar psychological pattern in responses to the country's own attempted genocide. There was denial via silence or misinformation, followed by disassociation ('It happened a long time ago', 'One cannot judge historical events by today's moral standards') and displacement, redirecting historical guilt towards the hardships endured by the early settlers ('The convict settlers were also oppressed by the British colonialists').

6

Of all the monuments commemorating the Holocaust, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin is probably the most famous. Located in the city centre, a stone's throw away from the Brandenburg Gate and the Parliament, it is a maze made from 2711 grey concrete slabs of different sizes

erected on an area the size of two football fields. It is monumental in the best sense, in that it solemnly evokes the sheer scale of the Holocaust. The abstract nature of the slabs allows for a range of associations, like train carriages or chimneys, and once you enter the place creates a feeling of disorientation. Below the monument is a museum simply called Place of Information that both provides historical background to the Holocaust and in a separate room highlights the fates of individual families all across Europe, from *shtetl* dwellers in Eastern Europe to families from Europe's urban centres. In the overall darkened space, which feels oppressive, the illuminated displays of old family photos and documents are like islands in the sea at night. It is a powerful display that complements the unsettling nature of the abstract memorial above and illustrates the intended destruction of an entire, diverse European culture in a way that every time I visit I find emotionally overwhelming.

On the day my daughter and I went to the memorial, a large rally of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) took place in front of the parliament. The party had bussed in 10,000 of its followers from all over the country, many of them from the neo-Nazi fringe. Roads were blocked, the riot police were out in force to separate Antifa protesters from participants in the rally and the atmosphere was tense. When we left the museum, the sounds of the rally and the counter-protest were wafting across: whistles and cheers and shouts and distorted snatches of speeches from PAs

and megaphones. My daughter turned to me and said: ‘I really don’t understand that there are still Nazis. The facts are so clear’.

Memorials and public holidays to remind us of past injustices might not be a universal panacea against racism and bigotry, as the recent rise of the far Right in Germany and beyond attests, but as long as they can raise awareness and keep alive the memory about past wrongs among the majority, and particularly among the young, they are a worthwhile exercise in containing the rise of revisionist forces.

7

The facts about the attempted genocide of Indigenous Australians are also clear, thanks to the many descendants of First Nations people who have passed on their histories, and the pioneering work of academics such as Marcia Langton and Henry Reynolds in the 1980s and 1990s. Numerous historians, sociologists, archaeologists, anthropologists and other academics have since followed, researching and documenting this deep scar in Australia’s history.

But while the information is there, in Australia one has to look harder for it than in Germany. It is not yet woven into the fabric of everyday culture. Reinstating Indigenous place names is a start; so is acknowledging Country at the beginning of gatherings or employing Indigenous languages more, as TV host Stan Grant used to do to greet the audience at the start of the public affairs panel show Q&A.

The case of Stan Grant, a high-profile television journalist, is instructive in that it illustrates the subterranean racism that still exists. While public displays of racism are regarded as socially unacceptable and quickly rebuffed, racial abuse is rife in the more anonymous arena of social media, where Grant became a target. After he discussed the role of the British monarchy in the colonial suppression of First Nations people during a panel discussion on the occasion of the recent coronation, abuse reached such an intolerable level that it caused him to take an indefinite break from television.

The example of Grant demonstrates not just a reticence but a violent rejection by many of the need to confront the Indigenous history of Australia’s colonial past. In this climate, even the modest change of renaming places is often resisted. For example, the Colonial Frontiers Massacre Project, led by Lyndall Ryan at the University of Newcastle, has produced an interactive map charting hundreds of massacres across the nation. Yet there remain many place names that allude to those massacres, including numerous ‘Murdering Creeks’.

Where are the official memorials? Where are the monuments for the Indigenous fighters in the Border Wars? Where, at the very least, are the plaques on the statues of the colonial overlords who oversaw these massacres that might provide context? National Sorry Day on 26 May is a regular work day that barely registers in the public mind. Instead, we have the bizarre annual pantomime of politicians from all parties casting the Australian national day on 26 January as one that brings all Australians together: the day Captain Arthur Phillip established the first colonial outpost on Australian soil, killing scores of the original owners of the land, the Gadigal people, in the process and marking the start of the oppression of Indigenous populations. Is this really the response of a nation that is ready to confront the sorrows of its past?

8

Could the model of *Erinnerungskultur* offer a solution? In her book, provocatively entitled *Learning from the Germans—Confronting Race and the Memory of Evil*, Susan Neiman asks this very question. She dives deep into the legacy of racism and the Civil War in the American South and answers in the affirmative. A similar case could easily be made in my adopted country.

It can be problematic for a white person to comment on Indigenous issues, irrespective of whether they are a migrant like myself or a descendant of the colonisers. Commentary is, quite rightly, often regarded as appropriating yet again the voices of First Nations people while lacking the necessary insight into the lived experience of Indigenous Australia. However, to use this as an excuse to shy away from establishing an *Erinnerungskultur* is to misunderstand its concept: it would primarily be an

act of self-reflection by non-Indigenous Australia. It puts the onus on the descendants of the perpetrators, and places the descendants of the victims in the role of arbiter, advising on whether what is proposed is right or appropriate. The new monument in my hometown was initiated, designed and installed by the town's gentiles, but in close consultation with the local Jewish community. The renaming of our Australian council area was initiated by a predominantly white council, but negotiated with representatives of the Indigenous community.

Erinnerungskultur is essentially inward-looking through what Neiman calls 'rites of repentance': the days of remembrance and the memorials and museums that serve as symbolic manifestations of the willingness not just to acknowledge but to confront those unpalatable aspects of a country's past. While it might prepare the psychological ground, it is separate from political questions such as, in Germany's case, compensation for victims, bringing war criminals to trial, or, in Australia's, establishing a Voice to Parliament, negotiating a treaty, expanding land rights and, yes, providing compensation also.

9

Seeing themselves as a no-nonsense, hands-on people, Australians often shun the politics of symbolism. Instead, they stress the need for practical action, manageable budgets, measurable outcomes and the like, as if the two were incompatible by some law of nature. It is telling that the counsellors in my local government area who voted against the name change to Merri-bek did so mainly on the grounds of the high cost of changing stationery, signage, websites and the like.

The rare occasions when the political class has engaged in symbolic acts are momentous and remain present in the collective memory: the iconic image of then prime minister Gough Whitlam pouring soil into the hands of traditional land owner Vincent Lingiari; the undiminished power of Paul Keating's Redfern Speech; the moving public apology to the Stolen Generations by Kevin Rudd. Conservatives tend to deride these acts as lip-service to fleeting moral fashions that are without practical consequences, conveniently disregarding the ineffectiveness of their own paternalistic policies during their time in

government. Most of the time, conservatives reject admissions of historical guilt as making people unnecessarily ashamed of their country and thus weakening their triumphalist narrative of nation-building.

When it comes to the referendum on the Voice, these battle-lines have been perversely inverted. The Leader of the Opposition, who famously chose not to attend the apology to the Stolen Generations, has now suddenly discovered his preference for a purely symbolic recognition of Indigenous people in the Constitution, without the tangible implications of a Voice to Parliament, as a so-called compromise in exchange for bipartisan support in the run-up to the referendum. This is of course nothing but a cynical ploy designed to derail the referendum. Not only does this disingenuous window dressing deny agency to Indigenous people, it also abdicates responsibility for the legacy of colonial oppression and undermines the power of genuine political symbolism to unite and to heal.

10

Australia has come a long way in reframing its relationship with its First Nations peoples since I arrived as a migrant thirty-five years ago, but has a long way still to go. I now realise that the freedom from history I once relished as a newly arrived migrant was an illusion, and that no country can escape the burden of its past. What I once found liberating—Australia's relentless focus on the present and the future—I now think of as constraining, and wish my adopted country had its own culture of remembrance. If the Uluru Statement from the Heart is a generous invitation by First Nations people to white Australia to build a better future together through the Voice, Treaty and Truth-Telling, a meaningful *Erinnerungskultur* could well be the reciprocal offer by white Australia to acknowledge the past and grow as a nation through shame, sorrow and pride. ■

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