Hiroshima: The Origins of Global Memory Culture

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We have a sense of living on in our children and their children, an endless biological chain of being. Or in our work, small or large, in our influence upon others; or in something we call spiritual attainment, some sort of religious idea or belief; or in the idea of eternal nature, which all societies symbolize in some way. Or else through the experience of transcendence, the psychic state that Freud called the “oceanic feeling,” one so intense that time and death disappear. Perhaps the most fundamental impact of nuclear weapons on us, without their use (or without their use again), is the break they represent in the great chain of being, the doubt about our still being links in that chain. (1)

In 1982, Robert J. Lifton, a Jewish American psychiatrist known for his research on Hiroshima survivors, Vietnam veterans and Nazi doctors, highlighted the exclusion of a symbolical survival after death as ‘the most fundamental impact of nuclear weapons’; in other words, in the case of a nuclear catastrophe, anything able to guarantee such a symbolical continuity – a child, a lifework, an idea – would vanish simultaneously with the biological body. 32 years later, Ran Zwigenberg picks up the threads from Lifton in order to tell a largely untold story. In his narrative, Zwigenberg attempts to historicize the complex ways through which Hiroshima, the city where the first ever atomic bomb was dropped, has survived in memory culture. And he does it brilliantly.

Hiroshima: The Origins of Global Memory Culture consists of a comprehensive introduction, seven well-researched chapters, a brief but thought-provoking conclusion and a helpful index. His primary sources include a great variety of published and unpublished material, located, amongst others, in archives and collections primarily in Japan (Hiroshima City Archive, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park Archive, Hiroshima Prefectural Archives, Hiroshima University Archive) but also Poland (Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum Archive), Germany (German Federal Archives), the United States (The New York Public Library), Austria (Robert-Jungk-Bibliothek für Zukunftsfragen), France (UNESCO Archives), Switzerland (WHO archives) and Israel (Yad Vashem Archives). In general, Zwigenberg’s methodology presents considerable interest. More specifically, in chapters one, two, three, and six the author employs a traditional
comparative approach in examining Hiroshima alongside other places such as Germany and Israel. As we will see, in chapters four, five, and seven he adopts, instead, the recently developed methodology of ‘entangled histories or histoire croisée’, by which he takes into account ‘the fluidity of categories and the way in which these develop through cross-influences and the circulation of ideas’ (p. 4). This approach helps him explore not only the first part of the title of the book, i.e. Hiroshima, but also the second one, i.e. global memory culture. It certainly seems more fruitful to study the latter through the examination of entangled influences than by mere comparisons among different regions. In what follows, a brief overview of the content of the chapters will shed more light on the book’s scope and main themes, before moving to a discussion of its greatest strengths and weaknesses.

Chapters one and two mirror each other in their depiction of the commemoration of Hiroshima’s tragedy in the early post-war period: while the former deals with the actions of the ones in power manifested in the overlapping of interests between the American occupiers and the Japanese elites, the latter focuses on the reactions of the hibakusha, namely A-bomb survivors. Hence, in chapter one, we follow the story of how the memory of the bomb was constructed as a mistake that brought peace to Japan and the world, through the voice of Japanese officials and media; at the same time, the bomb was seen and presented as an opportunity of fundraising for the reconstruction of the city. The Americans, craving yet one more Cold War ally, reinforced this newly emergent peace narrative in an attempt to incorporate Hiroshima – the very city where they dropped the A-bomb – into ‘the new bright world of Pax Americana’ (p. 39). Moreover, this chapter brings to our attention an early manifestation of a phenomenon that would be examined in greater detail in chapter six: a certain commodification of Hiroshima’s memory via tourism, A-bomb artefacts and, pre-eminently, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, designed by architect Tange Kenzo. Indeed, chapter six describes how the violent events of 1963 inside the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, when several radical students protested in support of the (Chinese-backed) Japanese Communist Party’s resistance to the Test Ban Treaty, marked the beginning of the de-politicization of the Park: coinciding with a time of vast economic growth in Japan, the city of Hiroshima aimed at sanctifying as well as commercializing its memory, most powerfully embodied in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. Chapter two places emphasis on the survivors’ perspective on these issues. Zwigenberg argues quite convincingly that many hibakusha embraced the mainstream discourses on the bomb as an opportunity for peace, thus, challenging recent literature on ‘“counter-memories” and individual survivors’ power to subvert hegemonies’ (p. 25). Bringing in the often employed image of Hiroshima as the phoenix-city emerging from the ashes, the author discussed the role of the figure of the A-bomb survivors with regard to anti-nuclear activism:

Suffering became not only a political tool, but, in effect, a particular knowledge that conferred on the hibakusha an authority and a messianic mission. This in turn made hibakusha into “moral witnesses”, a move that had implications well beyond the realm of commemorative politics and the hibakusha movement itself … In Hiroshima, this resulted in a very peculiar victim-hero, who directed her anger into activism, and who not only refrained from challenging the existing structures of power and knowledge, but actually supported them (p. 93).

Chapter three, under the intriguing title ‘Socialist bombs and peaceful atoms: Exhibiting modernity and fighting for peace in Hiroshima, 1955–1962’, covers a period that roughly coincides with the Korean War. Its second and most interesting part deals with the place of Hiroshima in a post-war world largely dominated by Cold War politics. The 1956 ‘Atoms for Peace’ exhibit at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum is a paradigmatic example of the American agenda to present the bomb as progressive force that transformed the city into ‘a modern, consumerist and capitalist city’ (p. 112). Chapter four, the first one of the histoire croisée chapters, examines the role of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, psychology (henceforth abbreviated as ‘psy’ professions) in our current understanding of Hiroshima. More specifically, the author maps how Hiroshima’s bomb joined other historical conditions, preeminently the Holocaust but also the Vietnam War, in forming the conceptual category of the ‘traumatic event’. Zwigenberg’s argument on the ‘psy’ professions follows the broader argument of his book: in the immediate post-war period, the ‘psy’ professions were employed ‘in domesticating and neutralizing the subversive meanings of the bomb and atomic energy’ (p. 172). According
to Zwigenberg, the aforementioned psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton, who, amongst others, lobbied for the inclusion of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the DSM, was crucial in challenging both the way that ‘psy’ professionals conceptualized trauma and, most importantly, the very place of the ‘psy’ disciplines in the social context. However, while the author contextualizes Lifton’s views in an intellectual framework where other thinkers such as Theodor Adorno critique psychology, he does not place emphasis on a very relevant form of social criticism: the Anti-psychiatry movement which emerged, especially, in the Anglophone world in the 1960s and 1970s and attacked psychiatry as a discipline and an institution; its most notable representatives were R. D. Laing and David Cooper in Britain and Thomas Szasz and Erving Goffman in the United States. Chapters five and seven focus more systematically on the relationship, or better the entanglement, between these emblematic 20th-century events: Hiroshima and Auschwitz. Hence, they explore the Hiroshima-Auschwitz Peace March (when four Japanese men traveled 3,000 km from Hiroshima to Auschwitz in 1963), and the establishment and life of the Hiroshima-Auschwitz Committee and the Hiroshima-Auschwitz Museum from the 1970s until the 1990s.

There are several intriguing ideas and discussions throughout the book that merit scrutiny. The first one is the concept of modernity. The author more than once explores the paradox that a paradigmatic manifestation and, foremost, embodiment of modern science, the A-bomb, killed thousands of people. Indeed it killed them in the most atavistic way, appearing, thus, as a failure of modern progress and the Enlightenment doctrines. Nonetheless, this was turned again into a narrative of progress: the bomb was represented in the dominant political discourses as an opportunity for an enlightened peace as well as a reconstruction of the city based on modern standards. On top of that, Zwigenberg’s stimulating discussion of Hiroshima memory culture as cultivated through the globalization of commemoration leaves open ground for exploring emergent post-modern queries or, perhaps, a more sophisticated critique of the modernity meta-narratives. There is of course a long tradition of such critiques: Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, founding members of the Frankfurt School, wrote about it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), political theorist Hannah Arendt dealt with these issues in her 1963 account on the Eichmann trial, while sociologist Zygmunt Bauman followed a similar path in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989). More recently, the intellectual historian of Nazism Dan Stone critiqued the use of modern theoretical systems in Holocaust historiography precisely on these grounds: he defied a total abandonment of the Enlightenment based on its genocidal consequences, and suggested, instead, that the scientists’ involvement in the Holocaust demands a critique of the Enlightenment tradition which, ‘should not lead to a celebration of the irrational, without which the “modern” aspects of the German state would not have been placed in the service of genocide’ but the search for a ‘better version of the Enlightenment … one based not on totalizing blueprints’. (2)

Another advantage of this book is the way that the analytical categories of class, gender and race are entangled (to use Zwigenberg’s term for his methodology) in the investigation of Hiroshima memory culture. Especially the employment of the category of class runs through the whole text. The author provides historical explanations based on class struggle or, at least, a difference in motives and actions between the elites and the working class; the abovementioned mirroring of chapters one and two is a good example of this approach. Moreover, adopting a more Foucauldian perspective, he often stresses the post-atomic hegemonic discourse with regard to power structures. His main argument is that Hiroshima’s unprecedented destruction has been remembered and commemorated in ways that challenge neither the Americans, as the principal perpetrators, nor Japan’s ruling classes:

The bomb was presented not as a probable result of our reliance on science and technology but – in the words of the epitaph of the central memorial cenotaph – a mistake: a sort of temporal slippage into a darker time. Furthermore, Hiroshima’s sacrifice was supposed to rectify this error somehow, set history right and put progress back on its “normal” course. The bomb therefore was presented as a transforming baptism, on one hand, and a rupture that must be healed, on the other (p. 2).

Indeed, Zwigenberg complicates the picture in a sophisticated manner, by discussing the largely repressed
imperial past of Japan, the fact that the emerging survivor figure could be found amongst all classes, and the economic exploitation of the traumatic memory per se. Gender is also used as an analytical tool; for instance, there are specific references to the exploitation of women as in the case of brothels set up by the Japanese for the Americans during the occupation (p. 27) or the ‘attractive “guide girls” (guido garu)” for touring in the atomic sights of Hiroshima (p. 44), but also Japanese women’s involvement in post-war politics (p. 98), and the employment of the survivor figure in feminist causes (pp. 170–1). Furthermore, the category of race is also employed in the book; for example in the particular case of the Hiroshima tragedy, there are a few references to survivors from the Korean and other outcast minorities who were discriminated against by some Japanese hibakusha. What is, however, most striking is the frequency of the references to the Jews and the Holocaust both in the form of a traditional comparison and in the ‘entangles histories’ manner. Beyond chapters five and seven, which are precisely devoted to this purpose, the conclusions of all chapters as well as the general conclusion in the end draw on direct and indirect links between Auschwitz and Hiroshima. In a discussion about 20th century, and indeed Second World War tragedies, it is almost necessary to bring in the Holocaust, together with its largely problematic representation as the global traumatic event and its extensively researched memory culture. Indeed, Zwigenberg shows his great historical understanding in reminding us that until the 1980s it was common to refer to Hiroshima and Auschwitz ‘as the twin horrors of the war’, and it was the emergence of memory studies only after the end of the Cold War, and, of course, Eurocentrism, that resulted in the marginalisation of Hiroshima. Nevertheless, the following question should be raised here: is this consistent comparison or entanglement, despite the author’s undisputable critique to the dominant Western gaze, also serving to legitimise the importance of his work on Hiroshima? Does he attempt, in other words, to speak about the Holocaust also in order to convince that Hiroshima is equally, or – since quantitative terms are not particularly useful when it comes to mass killings – correspondingly important?

Let me conclude by mentioning what I think is the greatest strength of this book: an exceptional combination of meticulous and multi-level archival research with a strong critical voice. Besides, towards the end of the ‘Acknowledgments’, Zwigenberg writes that, despite common representations of Hiroshima as significant because of its historical past, the purpose of his book is ‘to make its modest contribution so that the city of Hiroshima will be relevant once again’ (p. xiii). I strongly believe this purpose is exceptionally fulfilled.

Notes


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