Speaking the Unspeakable in Postwar Germany: Toward a Public Discourse on the Holocaust

It is a bold gesture to enter yet another study into the vast and seemingly ever-expanding series of books treating Holocaust discourse. Sonja Boos’s principle claim is appropriately self-assured: The eight figures treated here—major intellectuals and poets—are said to have ushered in, or at least “laid the seeds for,” Germany’s contemporary “culture of memory,” something increasingly seen as a significant and even exemplary achievement in the commemoration of a nation’s genocidal past. Thus we are not concerned here with yet another genealogy of Nazism, something that has occupied a great deal of Holocaust scholarship over the last several decades, but rather with a genealogy of remembrance—a corrective discourse that has displaced what we generally assume to be widespread suppression and denial in the postwar period. Boos sets out to tell this story by closely examining a series of public addresses (mainly acceptance speeches for major German literary awards) given by Martin Buber, Paul Celan, Ingeborg Bachmann, Hannah Arendt, Uwe Johnson, Peter Szondi, Peter Weiss, and Theodor Adorno. This is a fascinating gambit because all of these figures are of course known far better for other accomplishments, namely, for works of philosophy, fiction, poetry, and literary scholarship. There is an intriguing promise here of fresh insight into known figures. “By disrupting the discursive structures of postwar society and by introducing a language that is sometimes hesitant, sometimes taciturn, but always self-consciously (anti-)rhetorical,” Boos argues, “these public speakers exemplify what Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt would come to define . . . as a Gegenöffentlichkeit (counter-public sphere).”

The premise here is that this assemblage of acceptance speeches can actually have altered the public sphere enough to account for even a partial or incipient shift in German Holocaust discourse. That is a difficult case to make, I would submit, and it is made even harder by the fact that this is essentially a historical claim that is never really treated as such. On the other hand, Boos’s argument can easily seem self-validating or simply axiomatically true: from Buber to Adorno, it is clear that all the “speakers” treated here have challenged Germans to awaken to the genocide and to the postwar remnants of Nazism still present in society. Not all did so explicitly, to be sure; but there is certainly a strong prima facie case to be made that these prominent Jews (Boos identifies
them all as such) broadly contributed, if in sometimes supremely enigmatic ways (Celan), to the new memory culture. How could it be otherwise?

The potential liability for Boos is twofold: the latter reading could reduce her study to a kind of “filling in the blanks” of a thesis already well accepted, while the former (the historical claim about an altered public sphere) appears well beyond the reach of this study. These twin dangers remain present throughout, I think; but it is a tribute to Boos that her rich and insightful scholarship makes each chapter intrinsically interesting. Scholars of German Jewish studies (and others) will simply want to savor the lesser-known aspects of these prominent figures. So, even when the analysis strains to bind these thinkers to the Procrustean bed of the Kluge-Negt counter-public sphere model, one feels rewarded with a well-told story of intellectual history.

Yet, it is a story that provokes. This study is book-ended with fine chapters on Buber and Adorno, respectively; and it is not difficult at all to see how these notable thinkers challenged the “hegemonic economies of knowledge construction,” a somewhat turgid way of referring to a dominant public discourse that neglected mention of or reflection upon the Holocaust. But when we get to the thinkers sandwiched in between, the argument shifts. Here we are asked to believe that “refusals,” “silences,” and even indecipherable speech were folded into public culture in a manner that somehow gave rise to a more congenial culture of memory several decades later.

Celan provides the most illustrative, if somewhat extreme example. As Boos herself explains, his address is characterized by “highly abstract and often disjointed sentences replete with cryptic messages that even the quickest thinker might capture only upon reading and rereading the text.” It ends, we read, in mystification “and thereby annihilates whatever modicum of meaning it may have produced along the way.” What is more, much of the speech—due to a technical snafu—was neither broadcast nor recorded in the first place! How then did it actually contribute to the much-posed “counter-public sphere”? It seems like it never really had a chance. Repeatedly, Boos points to the importance of the deictic situation, of the physical proximity of speaker to audience, and to the necessity of hearing the actual, sensual voice of the speaker. Much of this seems nullified, or at least placed in serious doubt, however, by a performance such as Celan’s. And it is of little consolation, at least to me, to read that his “speech surely reached a larger public than his books of poetry” based solely upon the fact that a fairly high percentage of Germans of the time (85%) possessed radios. That is a rather grand supposition.

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This would perhaps be trivial if he were the exception. But while admittedly an extreme case, Celan actually typifies most of the speakers treated in this study insofar as they are repeatedly singled out for their obstruction or rejection of what we would consider effective communication. Peter Szondi, for example, is credited with “acts of discursive contestation” in citing endless and largely incomprehensible passages from Benjamin, while Hanna Arendt is said to have self-consciously “staged her speech as a failure.” In each case, we are asked to see this “disruption” of normed discourse as a positive contribution, which it may, or may not, have been. But how would we know? Boos seems to me to be caught in a bit of a logical bind: if these speeches (with the notable exception of Buber and Adorno) actually registered at the time as a kind of protest to the dominant discourse of the day, then there would be considerably less of a claim to her argument. At most, one could say that she explains and elaborates upon what we already know. If, on the other hand, this protest is itself a kind of discovery—something not at all well appreciated at the time—then we would need to ask how such utterances can both be unknown and be counted as meaningful interventions in public discourse. (Reiterating the Kluge-Negt model of “Gegenöffentlichkeit” at the conclusion of each chapter only repeats an assertion that needs to be demonstrated.) Of these two options, the bulk of Speaking the Unspeakable seems to me to qualify as the latter: Boos’s very intelligent close readings, enhanced by an impressive background in rhetoric, illuminate new and intriguing aspects of these otherwise well-known thinkers. Her story is both new and compelling.

Invoking the “performative” nature of some of these utterances is fully justified as a rhetorical descriptor. But lacking careful attention to the actual, historical public sphere and discourse networks of postwar West Germany, the appeal to the “performative” does at times seem a bit of a deus ex machina. To her credit, however, it is Boos herself who on several occasions points to the need for a consideration of specific reception data, going so far in one case as to assert that we can not really understand the speaker’s contribution without a full grasp of the particular historical situation. In the end it would be good to know something about the size and nature of these speakers’ audiences, and to get some sense of how (and if) their sundry “messages” were received, digested, and disseminated. Theory is here sometimes an enemy of history.

As the study progresses, the so-called 68ers evolve into the villains of Boos’s story. At the outset, however, they are the very markers of her subjects’ success: “Even though the contemporary audiences often failed to register the
subversive potential of these public speeches . . . the speeches nevertheless set the stage for what many consider a more ‘revolutionary’ episode in German history, the protest movement of 1968.” Even if this weren’t rather questionable evidence of her speakers’ public efficacy (does it somehow skip a generation?), we are left to wonder by study’s end where this good will toward the student movement has gone. At any rate, by the time we have learned of Uwe Johnson’s quite devastating critique of the student movement, and been reminded of the students’ rude interruption of Adorno’s Goethe lecture, the 68ers have been reduced to impediments: the “counterpublic” so central to this book’s thesis is ultimately portrayed has having been “stalled by the student revolts at the end of the postwar era.”

While this book is principally concerned with public speeches of prominent Jews given in postwar Germany, there are some wonderful deviations. To my mind, the two strongest chapters are actually those in which Boos joins her interest in actual public speech to a treatment of fictionalized renderings of such speech. Her discussion of Johnson’s Jahrestage (Anniversaries) constitutes a fascinating treatment of the novel in light of the author’s actual public speech before the American Jewish Committee (to the extent we can actually reconstruct it). She recounts—and illuminatingly comments upon—the intriguing event in which the author, while trying to speak critically about West Germany’s failure to properly de-Nazify is heckled by an audience of American Jews. Here she is able to make valuable observations about genre distinctions that delineate historical, expository speech from fictional representation—a key question in Holocaust studies to which she makes valuable contributions.

Her penultimate chapter on Peter Weiss is a virtuoso analysis of Die Ermittlung (The Investigation), and one I will assign to my students in the future. In the best-written chapter of this book, she tells the complicated and fascinating story of this production and insightfully demonstrates how and why Weiss’s aesthetic interventions alter the documentary testimony taken from the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials. In this case as well, the juxtaposition of fact and fiction give the author the opportunity to view her material more clearly. With careful attention to juridical and, yes, historical (!) material regarding Nazi trials, Boos lucidly articulates the key asymmetry between the defendants and the witness/victims in the Frankfurt Trials: whereas “the survivors, obliged to use the language of those in power, were consigned to relinquish their own subjective perspective, . . . the defendants had legal recourse to the subjective power to ‘prove’ their innocence.” Moreover, in reflecting here on the double bind of
the victim-witness (whereby, as Lyotard has argued, a victim who gives testimony is often effectively deprived of his victimhood), Boos reinforces her earlier analysis of other speakers in the study.

Which is not to say that Boos’s interpretive talent is on display exclusively in matters of fiction—though in the Weiss chapter we are treated (at long last) to generous close readings. On the contrary, she is perceptive about the speeches as well. Rather, I would venture that the conjunction of these two kinds of “speeches” tends to ignite the author’s exegetical and rhetorical acumen. So, even if the reader retains some doubt about the claims implicit in this study’s subtitle (“Toward a Public Discourse on the Holocaust”) there is no doubt that Speaking the Unspeakable usefully brings to light a neglected genre by prominent intellectuals, illuminating a crucial strand of postwar discourse. Moreover, in examining the fictionalization of public speech regarding Nazism and the Holocaust (particularly by the two giants of twentieth-century German literature, Johnson and Weiss), this study concludes very strongly indeed.

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THE CONSUMING TEMPLE: JEWS, DEPARTMENT STORES, AND THE CONSUMER REVOLUTION IN GERMANY, 1880–1940

The rise of the department store has been intimately linked to the history of modernity in the Atlantic world (United States, France, Britain). In Germany, as many other aspects of modernity, the full-fledged department store arrived relatively late, around 1890, but expanded exceptionally fast, surpassing all but the American stores in both number and sales within only a decade. Around 1900, the German department stores had also the highest percentage of Jewish owners, and nowhere else was the association between department stores and Jews as strong and persistent as in Germany.

Paul Lerner’s monograph on the department store in Germany between 1890 and 1940 fills sizable gaps in both the history of consumer culture in Germany and Jewish cultural history. It attends, in the words of the author, “not only to the shaping of discourse by reality, but also to the shaping of reality by discourse.” Thus, The Consuming Temple digs happily into an extremely rich and varied body of material and media, both nonfictional and fictional. Key sources