REVIEW ARTICLE

Where Does German Memory Lie?

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Deutsche Erinnerungsorte. Vol. 1. Edited by Etienne François and Hagen Schulze. Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck. 2001. Pp. 724. EUR 34.90. ISBN 3–406–47222–2.

Deutsche Erinnerungsorte. Vol. 2. Edited by Etienne François and Hagen Schulze. Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck. 2001. Pp. 718. EUR 34.90. ISBN 3–406–47223–0.

Deutsche Erinnerungsorte. Vol. 3. Edited by Etienne François and Hagen Schulze. Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck. 2001. Pp. 784. EUR 34.90. ISBN 3–406–47224–9.

In the wake of Pierre Nora's enormously influential seven-volume collection *Les lieux de mémoire*,[1] historians from a number of countries have entered the race to publish surveys of national memory sites, including the Dutch,[2] the Italians,[3] and now even the Americans. In the last-named case, emulating Nora resulted in a chatty volume in which American historians reminisce about sites where, in the breathless words of the publisher, "the past comes alive for them."[4] While in step with the general growth of the heritage industry worldwide,[5] the European variant of this phenomenon is attributable in part to individual countries' fears that not only globalization (read: Americanization) but also the

1. Paris (1984–1992).
2. Pim den Boer and Willem Frijhoff, eds., *Lieux de mémoires et identities nationals* (Amsterdam, 1993).
3. Mario Isnenghi, ed., *I luoghi della memoria*. 3 vols. (Rome, 1997).
4. See William E. Leuchtenburg, ed., *American Places: Encounters with History* (New York, 2000).
5. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley, 1998); David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York, 1996).

Central European History, vol. 36, no. 3, 435–445

https://doi.org/10.1163/156916103771006089 Published online by Cambridge University Press

increasing power of the European Union will wash away valued national traditions. In the German case, the combination of national reunification and Europeanization creates a particularly complex context for identifying and nurturing national cultural capital. Not only was the German nation divided for more than a half century after World War II, but Germany's leadership position in the continuing transnational unification of European states meant that any project of national memory making would entail a multilayered approach that took account of the dispersed spatial and temporal dimensions that link German and European histories.

A little more than a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we now have a German entry in the field, a three-volume work encompassing 2,226 pages, edited by two distinguished historians, and containing 121 essays on an array of *Erinnerungsorte* (in addition to the editors' introduction and a short afterword by Pierre Nora at the end of volume three). This project is bound to stimulate discussion on both sides of the Atlantic because, as the editors make clear, to speak of German memory sites is to call up a historical record that contains moments of violence and discontinuity rarely equaled in other national traditions.

The useful introduction by François and Schulze indicates that the editors have been hardly less ambitious than other entrants in the heritage campaign. The initial step was to consider as many as five hundred memory sites. Had all of them been included, it would have put the Germans far ahead of Nora, who finally selected 130 places for his multivolume compendium. Nonetheless, *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* manages to encompass broad swaths of the German past with its selection of 121 items. As with all the projects of this genre, the concept of "memory sites," or "realms of memory," as the condensed English translation of Nora's collection puts it,[6] is open-ended, to state the matter conservatively. Not that the editors failed to exert themselves in trying to come up with a definition that was both more systematic than Nora's and appropriate to the uniquely ruptured nature of German historical tradition. François and Schulze mention the efforts that went into preparation for the project, including a major international conference at the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin, six semesters of advanced graduate seminars, doctoral dissertations and edited volumes, and numerous individual discussions. The outcome of all this busyness is nonetheless rather unsatisfying from a conceptual standpoint, since we are left with the idea that the memory site is finally only a metaphor.

Building on the work of the distinguished scholars of memory Aleida and Jan Assmann,[7] the editors define *Erinnerungsorte* as "durable, generations-long crys-

6. Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman, transl. Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols. (New York, 1996–1998).

7. See for example Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich, 1999); Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich, 1992).

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tallization points of collective memory and identity, which are embedded in social, cultural, and political customs, and which change to the degree that their perception, appropriation, use, and transmission are transformed" (vol. 1, p. 18). This definition is as subtle as it is challenging. But in practice it allows for the inclusion not only of physical sites or objects such as buildings, artifacts, and monuments, but also persons, events, songs, poems, stories, films, ideas, phrases ("Made in Germany," "We are the people"), and just about anything else. It is fair to ask if the resultant criteria for selection are finally so fuzzy as to make any choice of inclusion or exclusion highly subjective; and it is breathtaking to ponder what has been left out given that only a little more than one hundred sites made it into the collection. That there are (and will continue to be) "crystallization points" at which various historical actors gain orientation to the past cannot be doubted. But what precisely are the differences between a physical site where horrible events occurred, as for example a former Nazi or Stalinist concentration camp, and Beethoven's Ninth, the subject of Esteban Buch's essay in the third volume? What reason is there to include a physical location in the landscape and a musical composition, the most abstract of cultural productions, in a single concept? Now that the project of assembling and representing national memory sites has gained such momentum across national historiographies, it is time to refine and specify the notion of *Erinnerungsort* to take account of the tremendous variety of species of memory that exist.

Will the result of such refinement be that scholars will grow cautious about lumping together sites that have only the most general or abstract similarities with one another? Or will it be that vagueness and lack of specificity will be accepted as the cost of determining not what happened in the past, but rather what effects the past continues to have in the present? In considering such effects, perhaps historians will follow the trend of public culture, which is to ignore historical specificity and concentrate on what Nora has termed "rememoration," or "history of the second degree."[8] In this process, history becomes not the study of human agency and power structures, not the search for origins and causal narratives, but rather the present-oriented analysis of historical traces. I have expressed skepticism that German historians, aware of the need to document and verify the horrible crimes of the Nazi period, would ever accept the practice of rememoration in toto.[9] The multivolume selection reviewed here forces me to revise that skepticism. Indeed, as one German scholar has argued,

8. Pierre Nora, "From Lieux de mémoire to Realms of Memory," in *Realms of Memory*, vol. 1, *Conflicts and Division* (New York, 1996), xxiv.

9. Rudy Koshar, *From Monuments to Traces: Artifacts of German Memory, 1870–1990* (Berkeley, 2001), 284–85.

https://doi.org/10.1163/156916103771006089 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the very nature of German history reinforces the trend toward analysis of the evolving cultural resonance of the past.[10]

Yet another conceptual problem with the project is that the operative definition of memory sites makes it difficult to distinguish between what might be called social levels of memory. How to determine, for example, whether a particular site has truly national significance (whatever that might be) or is rather the object of some sectoral interest, as for example when a particular book, or perhaps an architectural monument, becomes a cherished object of affection for the cultural elite of a region or town? When one considers differences between personal and collective memory — a distinction that still roils conceptual debates on memory formation[11] — the complexities become even more daunting. How to take account of the numerous twists and turns that take place in personal, or familial, or generational appropriations of sites that only ostensibly have coherent and consistent cultural meanings?

Such arbitrariness resulted in the project organizers' setting limits that finally had little to do with the inherent nature of the concept itself. Three criteria helped them reduce the enterprise to manageable size. First, it was decided to concentrate on those sites/events that achieved importance mainly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Second, the editors chose to emphasize the permeability of German memory and identity, which meant the historical sites that made the final cut could be used to highlight interactions between German and European history. Third, the authors insisted that no strict hierarchy should be allowed between "important" and "trivial" sites. But the editors themselves note that a "*bildungsbürgerliche*, Western, and also Berliner perspective" (vol. 1, p. 22) entered into the picture from the very beginning, suggesting that the initial plan for a nonhierarchical approach was heavily altered if not scotched altogether.

Let us take these bracketing mechanisms one by one for a moment to consider how they have shaped the overall project. First, it is quite defensible to locate the volume within the chronological parameters the editors chose. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were elongated moments of national state formation, for Germans (though belatedly) as well as for most of the rest of the world, and it is logical and useful to include sites that were "produced," in a symbolic sense, by processes of nationalization over two centuries. Conversely,

10. Jürgen Danyel, "Unwirtliche Gegenden und abgelegene Orte? Der Nationalsozialismus und die deutsche Teilung als Herausforderungen einer Geschichte der deutschen 'Erinnerungsorte'," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 24, 3 (1998): 463–75.

11. Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam, "Collective Memory — What is it?" *History & Memory* 8 (Spring/Summer, 1996): 30–50; see also Tim Cole, "Scales of Memory, Layers of Memory: Recent Works on Memories of the Second World War and the Holocaust," *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 1 (2002): 129–38.

https://doi.org/10.1163/156916103771006089 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the project has an important cultural-political function to play in present-day conversations about the future of German memory. The editors refer explicitly to this function, just as numerous contributors do. Moreover, the comparison with Nora even more directly raises the issue of the necessary "presentism" of such scholarly rememoration. But whose presentism is to be served?

As one reviewer has noted, the choice of topics almost entirely bypasses the last decade of the late twentieth century, which is to say that it overlooks the beginning of the twenty-first century as a central moment of inspiration and cultural location for scholarship.[12] Who today, except perhaps for a handful of scholars, cares about Königin Luise, or Professor Unrat? What would be the result of a survey of younger Germans, those 16–25 years old for instance, who were asked their opinion of Rosa Luxemburg, the subject of Gilbert Badia's essay in the second volume? It was for this reason that one *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reviewer remarked that the collection, at least from the point of view of the first volume, consisted of discussion on many "memory sites grown cold."[13] With some exceptions, as for example Hartmut Zwahr's essay in the second volume on "We are the people," the signature slogan of the popular movement that unsettled the East German regime in 1989, this critique holds true for the other volumes as well. The volume's *bildungsbürgerlich* orientation, along with its fundamental preoccupation with the "long" nineteenth century as the seedbed of late modern German history, is quite evident here.

In contrast, the timely emphasis on Germany's interactions with European history seems to have been followed through most successfully, as every fifth contributor to the project is non-German, and the coeditor is French. Moreover, many of the topics (Albert Einstein, Charlemagne, the D-Mark, Faust, the Grimms' fairy tales, Made in Germany, Karl Marx, the Reformation, Rome, Versailles, and Volkswagen) have a broad European, if not also Euro-American, resonance. Even Catharina Clemens's essay in volume three on that quintessential Bavarian oddity, Ludwig II's Neuschwanstein, carried through this theme by discussing Disneyland's appropriation of the castle. In this regard, the three volumes achieve a level of broadly international scope that makes the Nora collection appear inward looking and provincial. There appears to be a quite interesting correlation here between the national memory cultures from which the projects originated and the collections themselves: multileveled, transnational, and essentially outward looking in the German case but relatively one-dimensional, national (if not nationalist), and given to maudlin flights of self-involved nostalgia in the French case. The relative porousness of the

12. Jan-Holger Kirsch, review of *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, vol. 1, 18 June 2001, <http://www.hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de>.

13. Ulrich Raulff, "Heil dir im Kaffeekranz," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (20 March 2001).

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German project is of course partly a function of the fragmented history of German nationhood itself; necessity was indeed the mother of invention. But the editors might also have decided not to formulate the enterprise in this manner. It would be a useful exercise in any event to ask whether such correlations exist for other projects of national recollection now that we are seeing the accumulation of such inventories of memory sites, or to put a rather less charitable spin on the subject, now that such efforts constitute a kind of scholarly cottage industry.

Its openness to foreign influences notwithstanding, the project is not without questionable presumptions of national uniqueness. For example, the editors argue that the eighteen themes that define the project as a whole are more or less untranslatable into other languages. As François and Schulze aver, using a quotation from Marc Bloch with reference to the word *Reich*, these terms possess "a typical German tone quality, so much so that they cannot be translated in any way into another language, which is embedded in a completely different memory culture" (vol. 1, p. 20). But this point reveals more about the assumption of national distinctiveness underlying the survey than about the material itself. Students of German history in the United States may respond skeptically to the idea that words such as *Bauhaus, Reich, Dichter und Denker, Volk, Erbfeind, Romantik, Zerrissenheit, Schuld*, and *Reformation* can be understood properly *only* in the German language. Whereas any good instructor of modern German history at the university level will emphasize the difficulties of translation across national linguistic and cultural boundaries, that same instructor will find plausible and productive ways to impart the historical meanings of these terms to students in their own language.

Perhaps other terms, such as *Bildung*, or *Heimat*, topics in volume three, support the editors' claim more successfully, but even here there is room for argument. After all, what sorts of multiple connotations does the word "home" raise in the English language, just as it does in the German? Scholars of German history have often emphasized the essentially mysterious and untranslatable meaning of *Heimat*, but perhaps they have protested too much, or they have let themselves be seduced by the same notions of (national) distinctiveness and special knowledge that many authors of *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* have. And what of *Die Moderne* (volume two) and *Identitäten* (volume three)? Not only could a great majority of the 121 sites covered fit into both or at least one of these categories; but the terms also travel rather well across symbolic and linguistic borders, their historically specific and variable meanings notwithstanding.

Two other points regarding selection criteria should be mentioned. First, the editors chose not to include sites around which a substantial scholarship had already congealed, such as the great architectural monuments like the Kyffhäuser, the Völkerschlachtdenkmal in Leipzig, or Berlin's Neue Wache. The gigantic Leipzig monument receives short shrift in Kirsten Anne Schäfer's essay

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in volume two on the tradition of the 1813 Battle of the Peoples, and Wolfgang Mommsen's piece on the Paulskirche doesn't have much to say about this venerable building itself.[14] But when such places are dropped from the survey, or treated summarily, what becomes of the editors' claim that they have constructed a kind of "inventory" (vol. 1, p. 24) of national memory sites?

Second, the absence of a single, focused essay on the Nazi movement as a German memory site seems odd, if not disquieting. This is not to say that National Socialism has been ignored or marginalized. Indeed, Adolf Hilter receives more entries in the index for the three volumes than any other figure. There are essays by Joachim Fest on the Führerbunker and by Peter Reichel on Auschwitz in volume one; on the 20th of July (by Jürgen Danyel) and Stalingrad (Bernd Ulrich) in volume two; and on "Blood and Soil" (Anna Bramwell) in volume three. References to the Nazi regime and Nazi leaders are scattered throughout the volumes and, as the editors make clear, the ruptures and discontinuities of German history gain much of their emotional force from the horrors brought on by National Socialism. Nonetheless, the impact of Nazism on German memory sites appears diffuse and fragmented, like water streaming through one's fingers. A major essay on Hitler himself, or on the NSDAP as a whole, would have provided a useful and fascinating antidote to this impression. One might express the point even more forcefully: in order to make a comprehensive statement that is adequate to the complex task of articulating the shape and content of German memory culture at the turn of the present millennium, an entire volume should have been devoted to National Socialism itself, as a constitutive moment in the symbolic landscape from which the German nation draws its sense of self.

A short review essay cannot do justice to the 121 essays themselves, which cover an impressively rich spectrum of historical phenomena. The contributions are of a generally high quality, ranging from sophisticated feuilleton pieces (Fest's essay in volume one on the *Führerbunker*) to more unadorned academic discussions. As noted before, they include memory places or concepts for which most Germans today show little interest (Otto Gerhard Oexle on Canossa, Frithjof Benjamin Schenk on Tannenberg/Grunwald, Claire Gantet on the Peace of Westphalia) as well as those that have been seared into contemporary German identity (Peter Reichel on Auschwitz, Edgar Wolfrum on The Wall). Some of the great intellectuals receive their due in individual essays on Goethe, Theodore Fontane, the Humboldts, the Manns, Heinrich Heine, Moses Mendelssohn, Karl Marx, and Nietzsche; others, like Luther, appear throughout the essays although they don't receive specialized treatment. Less renowned or

14. One wonders, then, why the Brandenburg Gate and the Wartburg, both of which have attracted much expert discussion, are included in volume 2.

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secondary intellectuals who nonetheless had important roles to play in the German past also receive attention at various points. Karl May is the subject of an essay by Rolf-Bernhard Essig and Gudrun Schury in volume three.

Whereas several of the authors argue they are writing the "history of reception [*Rezeptionsgeschichte*]" of specific sites or traditions, their view of public appropriations is narrow, as befits a volume whose editors concede their *bildungsbürgerlich* bias. To be sure, it is far easier from a research standpoint to cite intellectual opinion about popular cultural productions, from soccer games to fashion, than to consult newspapers, magazines, opinion polls, police reports, travel guidebooks, and other sources that tap into popular expression. Yet the effect is to reproduce the same cultural bias that generated the choice of topics in the first place. This constricted view is troublesome, and it is especially noticeable when the history of popular responses to Grimms' fairy tales, to ethnographic museums, to the Berlin Wall, and to the anti-Semitic film *Jud Süß* — to take only several examples from the first volume — is discussed. In these and many other instances, we receive what amounts to nothing more than a gesture to the history of everyday attitudes and practices. In Rainer Moritz's treatment of *Der Schlager*, we have a sensitive and revealing portrait of the significant place that popular musical hits have played in German memory. But although the piece abounds in interesting information on the songs and artists, from Freddy Quinn to Heino, Moritz concludes by writing that it is "difficult to grasp precisely what constitutes the decisive effect of a song" (vol. 3, p. 218). As true as this may be, one wonders if a brief research sortie into music fan magazines would have addressed this issue. By comparison, Gunter Gebauer, who writes on German soccer's Bundesliga, another topic that calls out for analysis of popular attitudes, gives us a more socially grounded account when he discusses the soccer team as the "representative of a particular audience" (vol. 2, p. 461). But even here, the evidence is gestural rather than substantive.

Within some of the thematic sections, the combination of topics creates a rather dispersed impression. Among the contributions to the first volume's section on "Disunion," for instance, we get fairly focused discussions on Heine (Michael Werner) and Nietzsche (Steven Aschheim), but also pieces that seem diffuse or difficult to contain analytically, such as Wolfrum's treatment of the Berlin Wall or Heinz Reif's chapter on the Junkers. In the section on "Guilt," again in the first volume, the overall effect is even more disorienting, but for a quite different reason. It is disconcerting to read Hartmut Lehmann's finely argued essay on pietism, a centuries-long tradition based on a deeply personal sense of humankind's guilt and potential redemption before God, side by side with chapters that discuss rather more situated historical and collective attributions of guilt: the "stab-in-the-back" legend; Auschwitz; admonitory memorials (*Mahnmäler*); Willy Brandt's unexpected act of contrition kneeling before the Warsaw Ghetto Monument in 1970; and the memory of Nazi collaborators.

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Lehmann himself addresses this radical discrepancy, but he does not resolve it (pp. 581–84). Not that all the thematic sections leave one with this fragmented orientation. The essays grouped under the category "performance" (*Leistung*) in volume two fit together beautifully, ranging from Heinz-Gerhard Haupt's essay on *Das "goldene" Handwerk* to Harold James's discussion of the D-Mark and Gunter Gebauer's contribution on German soccer. But rarely are the thematic ensembles as coherent or as generally strong as this one is.

This raises the question of whether it would have been preferable to dismantle the conceptual scaffolding of the *Erinnerungsort* into object-oriented categories — persons, monuments, events, films, automobiles, clothing, books, and the like — instead of opting for the diffuse thematic arrangement we have at present. The reasoning here is that much of what makes a memory culture resonate with meaning is determined by the *use* to which various objects or ideas are put in historically conditioned contexts. Why not therefore begin with the "thing" itself and move out from there, comparing how a particular object works as a memory site with other objects over time. Following the "commemorative life"[15] of specific artifacts, one might find that a car[16] or a pair of blue jeans were far more powerful in evoking the past for large groups of Germans than were the *Führerbunker* or *Hausmusik* (see the essay in the third volume by Francis Claudon). In the present arrangement all *Erinnerungsorte* are *theoretically* more or less indistinguishable from one another even though we know that Auschwitz plays a much greater role in German appropriations of the past than does, for example, Arminius, the subject of Werner M. Doyé's contribution to volume three. Another result might be that major shifts in signification could be charted more accurately. The present topical arrangement leaves little room for studying the complex process whereby memory sites switch categories, as it were, operating within a "performance" discourse at one point in time, but perhaps in an "identity" function in another.

The editors make a point of arguing that their goal was not the creation of a new national memory discourse à la Nora but rather "reflection [*Nachdenken*]" (vol. 1, p. 23) on the German past, in the nuanced sense Thomas Nipperdey used this term. They are to be heartily congratulated for this emphasis, just as the collection is to be lauded for achieving a healthy balance between critical thoughtfulness and more positive assessments. This does not mean that the project avoids the occasional bout of national nostalgia. In the introduction to the section on "Poets and Thinkers," we find the statement that "the ever stronger integration of Germany in a transatlantic popular culture [*Trivialkultur*]" (vol. 1,

15. I borrow openly from Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York, 1986).

16. Consider for example the fascinating little volume by Franz-Josef Oller, ed., *Mein erstes Auto: Erinnerungen und Geschichten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999).

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p. 157) explains the slow erosion of public identification with a German literary canon noted for its sophistication and profundity. In a volume devoted to more self-reflexive perspectives on national memory, one might expect a comment on how this pessimistic observation reasserts the old idea that German (or European?) *Kultur* was subverted by a more superficial, commercialized, and now U.S.-dominated *Zivilisation*.

More revealingly in this regard, commercial and industrial culture, whether imported from the New World or homegrown, receives rather short shrift in the collection. In the first volume, only one of the essays deals with a commercial object, Erhard Schütz's well-done piece on the Volkswagen. In the same volume, in Anne G. Kosfeld's chapter on Nuremberg, the author notes that many aspects of the famous city's history became part of a "mass consumer culture," but this remains an assertion rather than an historically elaborated argument. Subsequent volumes do much better on this score, especially the second volume's aforementioned section on *Leistung*. Even so, given the enormous importance that industrial productivity and economic prosperity played in the formation of the German nation over the past century, it is surprising to find that commercially mediated "things" and places, to say nothing of important industrial concerns (Krupp? Daimler-Benz? Siemens?), occupy a marginal place in this inventory of German memory culture. Here too we see the traces of a rather old-fashioned high-bourgeois ambivalence about capitalism and the marketplace working, an ambivalence that makes it difficult to argue that a representative sample of sites, from the "important" to the "trivial," has made it into the collection.

Cultural studies scholars such as Barbara Kishenblatt-Gimblett have done much to illustrate how even the most evanescent commercial phenomena, such as hula hoops and automobile tailfins, aid people in indexing time, orienting them to past, present, and future.[17] The stunning discontinuities of the marketplace result in the complex ordering of continuities by individuals whose relation to a personal, familial, or even national past becomes mediated by commercial objects. Tourism transforms historical places into marketed "destinations" that nonetheless facilitate connections to the past, if only superficially. These kinds of considerations find little room in the collection, though it would be unfair to argue that they are entirely overlooked.

To highlight such shortcomings is not to single out *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* as a flawed or highly problematic project; in many respects the volumes succeed where Nora's precedent-setting collection did not. It is rather to point out that the François/Schulze enterprise suffers from many of the same deficiencies that scholarship on collective memory does. The collection's loose conceptualiza-

17. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 273–74.

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tion is a function of the sloppiness inherent in the concept of the *lieu de mémoire* itself. The seemingly arbitrary selection criteria follow from the conceptual inadequacies. The lack of attention to industrial and commercial artifacts mirrors a significant reticence in much current research on memory. Even so, the three massive volumes of *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* will take their place alongside Nora's project as a milestone of contemporary scholarship in European cultural history. They will deserve continued serious discussion, if not always imitation.

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