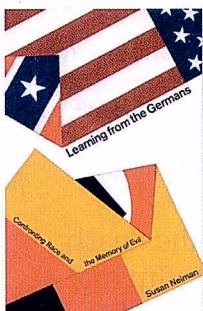


Toxic inheritances

MARY FULBROOK is impressed by a new study that contrasts how Germany and the United States have dealt with the long aftermath of state-sanctioned racism



Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil
Susan Neiman

Allen Lane, 432 pages, £20

So much has been made of the evils of Germany's Nazi past, and so clearly has the United States been cast

as liberator of Europe from the Nazi yoke, that it seems initially surprising to suggest that the US could learn from Germany about how to deal with the legacies of racism. But this is the thesis that Susan Neiman, a philosopher specialising in the analysis of evil, advances in this compelling, personal account.

Neiman is well placed to make the comparison. Growing up as a white woman in the American South, she experienced at first hand the legacies of slavery and persisting racism in the US. And as a Jew who lives in Germany's capital city, Berlin, she is well placed to observe the ways in which Germans have dealt with Nazism. The result is a fascinating mixture of "analysis and anecdote", in which Neiman's own intelligent voice can be clearly heard throughout.

The differences are well known. In the US, slavery was formally abolished in the wake of the Civil War, with the 13th Amendment of 1865. But the so-called Jim Crow laws passed in the decades around the turn of the century in the formerly Confederate Southern states effectively disenfranchised African-Americans and ensured strict segregation. These racist laws were only overturned in the 1960s, but their legacies persist in the American South (and beyond).

In Germany, Hitler's "thousand-year Reich" lasted but a dozen years, during which it unleashed a world war of unparalleled genocidal aggression. Since defeat in 1945, both East and West Germany and now the united Germany have, in different ways, faced up to the legacies of racism in ways that the US, Neiman argues, has so far failed to do.

As far as acts of remembrance are concerned, Neiman certainly has a point. She perhaps downplays, however, the massive

disjuncture between West German public acknowledgement of responsibility and the fact that former perpetrators were allowed to get away unpunished, while recognition and compensation were refused to many former victims. This imbalance was hardly rectified by the more recent explosion of memorialisation propelled by subsequent generations, ashamed of their national past. Neiman mentions these aspects, but does not, in my view, weigh them sufficiently in the moral balance. She also points out that the commu-

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nist German Democratic Republic, for all its dictatorial faults, in some respects did a better job of addressing its past than West Germany, although here she arguably underplays the significance of the anti-fascist myth across generations.

Yet, even if memorialisation of anti-Nazi resistance has at times been ambiguous, Germany long ago renounced Nazi symbols. This contrasts with the multiple failures to address persisting and sometimes murderous racism in the US, and to allow hated symbols such as the Confederate flag or statues of Confederate heroes to garner public acclaim. The author pulls no punches in her critique of Trump, whom she accuses of legitimising or condoning white supremacy.

Neiman's book is an informative and stimulating read, provocatively addressing significant questions that, sadly, remain all too relevant today. **H**

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Opposed to change In Montgomery, Alabama in 1963, protesters take to the streets to oppose school integration. The US, argues Susan Neiman, has not done enough to grapple with the legacies of segregation