

Response to Ian Lustick’s ‘The Holocaust in Israeli Political Culture: Four Constructions and Their Consequences’

Editor’s Note: This Comment is a Response to Ian Lustick’s Article in this Issue of Contemporary Jewry v37(1)

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The study of the Holocaust and the dramatic rise of public interest in its memory are some of the more interesting and challenging topics for scholarly investigation from a number of academic perspectives. The present article is by no means the first attempt at undertaking this daunting and complex task, but its analysis of the transformation of Israeli memory of the Holocaust presents a new analytical framework that challenges us to reevaluate the complexities of collective memory and think further about their implications.

The article presents an analytical framework that introduces the development of the memory of the Holocaust in Israel through four constructs that present distinctive paradigms for understanding the Holocaust and that have a direct bearing on Israel’s political culture at that period. The discussion addresses key themes that characterize each of these constructs and includes various examples to illustrate their manifestation. The analysis suggests how internal Israeli political processes and relevant international developments account for the shift to the paradigm in question and points out the key agents of this transformation (or, at times, those who failed in their efforts to advance it).

The explicit goal of the article is to trace the development of the memory of the Holocaust in Israeli political culture by offering these four constructs. Yet, in so doing, it also brings across the point that the meaning of the Holocaust is neither inherent to the historical event, nor fixed in a certain understanding of its implications as the current hegemonic construct might lead one to believe. The article thus conveys a certain sense of urgency that goes beyond the understanding of the historical analysis to current politics.

The approach of the article to the study of Holocaust memory in Israel clearly fits the theoretical framework of memory studies that emphasize the dynamic character

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of memory, and the discussion would have benefited from being grounded more fully within this scholarship. Memory studies underscore the dialogic nature of collective memory that is based on the continuous interplay between the past and the present. The cultural construction of the memory of past events is shaped by historical knowledge about the past as interpreted from the present perspective, as well as by current ideological trends, political agendas, and social concerns. This theoretical framework also explains why an understanding of the past is so important for the interpretation of present developments and future trajectories, which is a key point that this article raises.

Memory scholarship also explains the way collective memory works through certain schemata (or templates) for the process by which knowledge about the past is selected, structured, and organized into a paradigmatic plot structure that creates a meaningful commemorative narrative. It thus offers the theoretical framework for understanding the significance of the four constructs the article presents. This broader perspective would also reinforce the realization that the phenomenon of changing interpretations of the past is not unique to Holocaust memory, or to the case of Israeli society. Rather, it occurs cross-culturally and in reference to other events. Every society thus forms its mnemonic tradition in which various schemata provide alternative choices for understanding the past.

More specifically, the article presents the four constructs for viewing the Holocaust as moving from a “Zionist proof-text” in the postwar years to a “wasting asset” in the 1950s, to a “human rights object lesson” in the early 1960s, to a “template for Jewish life” as the hegemonic construct in Israeli culture since the 1980s. This structure and the thrust of the argument reinforce the sense of a linear narrative that identifies different historical phases of development, culminating in the fourth one. Although Lustick briefly states that these are “four distinctive and recurring constructs” (and this point is illustrated in Gideon Hausner’s opening speech at the Eichmann trial), the article essentially evolves along the outline of sequential shifts from one prominent interpretive paradigm to another.

The four-construct sequence illuminates important changes in the interpretation and political uses of the Holocaust, but not all four appear to operate at the same cultural level. Whereas the “Zionist proof-text” and “template for Jewish life” paradigms resonate more widely in Israeli culture, the construct of a “wasting asset” appears to be more narrowly focused on the political and economic uses of the Holocaust during the 1950s and does not necessarily indicate a broad or deeper transformation of the meaning of the Holocaust for Israelis (although it clearly indicates the beginning of a fundamental change of the Israeli attitude toward the Germans).

It is the linear framework that the article presents that calls for further discussion. The longer I have studied collective memory, the more aware I have become that memory does not work in a linear fashion: When a new commemorative paradigm emerges (and it usually does), earlier paradigms do not necessarily disappear. They continue to be held by those resistant to the change or unaware of it; and we often find that divergent commemorative narratives coexist within the culture, serving as alternative cultural tools to be selected by different groups or the same individuals, as deemed appropriate in different situations. While the four-construct model

approach may offer a useful analytical tool that underscores the saliency of certain themes, the historical sequence also runs the risk that it might obscure the greater complexity of Israeli mnemonic culture.

Thus, for example, I would argue that the interpretation of the Holocaust as a "Zionist proof-text" still resonates in Israeli culture today, even though in a modified or softer version. The current version shows greater compassion for Jewish suffering, but it still stresses that diaspora Jews should know better than to stay in countries other than Israel, a historical lesson that they learn at a time of trouble. Furthermore, this softer "Zionist proof-text" version may be used as complementary to viewing the Holocaust as a "template for Jewish life," as becomes evident when the rise of antisemitism threatens a diasporic Jewish community. Such developments reinforce the saliency of an ever-present threat to Jewish life that the Holocaust represents and serve as the proof that Israel is still the place of refuge for all Jews. Israeli leaders have occasionally articulated this view in public, making the undiplomatic gesture of calling upon those Jews to immigrate to Israel. In a similar vein, the "wasting asset" construct resurfaced recently when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu invoked the Holocaust to warn against the negotiations with Iran about its nuclear development. The results of this intervention proved the failure of this mnemonic strategy, but one should note that Netanyahu was not the only one to embrace this construct, thus demonstrating its continuing presence.

The article rightly depicts the limited appeal of the universalistic model of a "human rights object lesson" as an educational and political template for Israeli Jews, and the discussion of the failures of Holocaust educational initiatives in the 1970s and the 1990s is illuminating. This failure is particularly interesting, given the significance attributed to the Holocaust as a paradigm for teaching about genocide and human rights outside of Israel (the mandatory teaching about the Holocaust in New Jersey provides one such example). Indeed, it is the universalistic message that accounts for the global interest in the memory of the Holocaust. One of the most intriguing aspects of this construct in Israeli political culture is its use as a counter-narrative to the hegemonic one. The Israeli Left has embraced the universalistic values of this construct and uses it to criticize government policies in various contexts. (Lustick briefly mentions it in the context of Israel's policies toward the Palestinians of the occupied territories, non-Jewish Israeli citizens, foreign workers, and, one should add, the refugees). The most powerful demonstration of its effectiveness as a counter-narrative was the mass protest in response to the massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila in 1982. Although the interpretation of the Holocaust as a "human rights object lesson" has been progressively weakened and the particularistic tendencies of the Israeli government and society have become more pronounced, the use of the Holocaust as a moral compass is articulated by politicians on the left, human rights activists, and NGOs, as well as writers, artists, filmmakers, and actors. It is important to present this role as an integral part of the study of the memory of the Holocaust in Israeli political culture.

Perhaps the most important point raised in this article is the challenge of the inevitability of the current interpretation of the Holocaust and the excessive role it plays in contemporary Israeli political culture. "Contemporary Israel is marked unmistakably with 'Holocaustia,'" Lustick argues. The article provides plenty of

evidence to support this claim, yet it goes beyond it to warn about the dangers that this hegemonic construct poses to Israel's future and to express hope for a change. The recognition of the nonlinear development of memory and the simultaneous existence of competing commemorative narratives about the Holocaust would further reinforce this possibility.

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