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Comparative National Blaming:

W.G. Sebald on the Bombing of Germany

In an article entitled “Israel, Palestine, and the Campus Civil Wars,” published in December 2004 in the online journal *Open Democracy*, the British historian Stephen Howe wrote: “There is a good rule of thumb for social arguments, now applicable to almost any subject and circumstance. It goes simply: whoever first mentions the Nazis loses the argument.”¹ I ask you to consider this one-liner in conjunction with another, not as clever but again emerging from debate about the Middle East. It describes a common response on the Israeli street to political reproaches from foreigners about Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians: “Nobody’s better than we are, so they should all shut up.”²

These slogans differ, of course, in how much shutting up they encourage and how much immunity from hostile commentary this silence seems intended to secure. At a certain level of abstraction, however, the two slogans can perhaps be said to share the same purpose: to throw a critical light on the rhetorical practice that I will call, for want of a more precise term, comparative national blaming. (A utilitarian alternative might be “the calculus of national accountability for infelicity,” but I can’t see that catching on.) Both sentences seem to object in particular to the use of national comparison in order to seize, as the saying goes, the high moral ground, invocation of Fascism as absolute evil, for example in Christopher Hitchens’s repeated post-9/11 references to “Islamo-Fascists,” being merely a special instance of such seizure. But is this an exercise that can only be conducted from a moral elevation? It might seem that criticism
of one nation’s conduct could be legitimately illuminated by reference to another nation’s conduct without anyone being obliged to produce a certificate of spotless rectitude. All likeness is inexact, but is this a sufficient reason for prohibiting references to the Union Carbide disaster at Bhopal as the Hiroshima of industrial accidents or discouraging parallels between today’s Guantanamo prison camps and the Soviet-era Gulag? On what grounds exactly should Toni Morrison be prevented from dedicating Beloved to the sixty million, thereby linking the victims of the Middle Passage to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust? Yet the second and more popular of my initial slogans, expressing a defensive national pride that is surely not confined to Israelis, refuses even a moderate version of national comparison. If one is permitted neither 1) to take sides on a questionable action or situation by identifying it with an earlier, unquestioned figure of wrongdoing (the Nazis) nor 2) to refer to national differences which also involve relative historical inequalities, whether of scale, of degree of guilt, or whatever, then national comparison itself seems ruled out–except to the extent that it always remains implicit in “nobody’s better than we are.” If forgiveness is what follows and undoes a prior act of blaming, then this discursive state of affairs might be tentatively described as generalized presumptive forgiveness.

In the United States, the assumption on the street would probably be that “we’re better than anyone else.” Within the limits set jointly by this assumption and by our overwhelming ignorance of the rest of the world, national comparison thrives. Perhaps the only place where it does not thrive is the humanities, where the anti-comparison position has made a surprising amount of room for itself. While Howe’s no-Nazi rule of thumb, which seems representative of the reigning academic common sense, seems intended merely to curb attributions of essential and irredeemable evil, it makes its point by implying that the Holocaust, a product of such evil,
is unique in that respect. Accordingly, the sufferings of its victims must therefore remain beyond or above all comparison. But this logic has proved wildly popular and therefore impossible to quarantine. In effect, the uniqueness of the Holocaust has been universalized. After all, whose national suffering is not, in its own way, unique? Whose national particulars cannot claim to be inherently incomparable? If it does not shut down completely all efforts to compare, the incomparability position certainly burdens them with considerable anxiety.

Benedict Anderson takes the title of his book The Spectre of Comparisons from José Rizal’s masterpiece Noli Me Tangere, where it refers to the Filipino hero’s inability to “matter-of-factly experience” the municipal gardens of Manila without simultaneously comparing them with the (original, primary) gardens he has seen in Europe (2). This double vision is “incurable” (2), Anderson says, but with such regret as to suggest that if so, then countries like the Philippines will never enjoy, as they have every right to, a genuine cultural autonomy. The search for a cure, a means of exorcizing the specter of comparisons, thus continues to motivate. It is commonly taken for granted across the humanities disciplines that because any comparison demands a common standard and because any (supposedly) common standard will in fact favor the interests of some over the interests of others (a frequent example is the discourse of human rights), comparison is imperialistic by its very nature. Although the academic rhetoric of praise-and-blame is far too deeply ingrained not to find other ways of expressing itself, one might say that, where international comparison is concerned, the academy has cordoned off a zone of universal blamelessness, dramatically distinct from the strident national name-calling assumed to be going on outside. Within this zone, the one critical act likely to be blamed is national blaming itself.
I begin with these two quotations, which call attention to the apparent but precarious division between academic and non-academic common sense on the comparing of nations, first of all because they frame the large questions that underlie this essay (without unfortunately finding satisfactory answers within it). How is comparative national blaming actually done? What might it look like if done better or done right? Can we, should we give up on it? These questions are urgent in themselves, but they also provide an essential background to the issues of forgiveness, mercy, and clemency dealt with in this volume. Common sense notions of justice and fairness, which flow into the law, pressure it, and sometimes expose its shortcomings, have of course their own shortcomings, for which the law in turn tries to compensate. Nowhere are both sets of shortcomings more obvious than in judgments of events beyond the borders of the nation. In the international realm, a realm to which the adjective “Hobbesian” seems almost as firmly attached now as fifty years ago, the law itself has only a fragile hold. The mass media, not notorious for their responsible attention to domestic matters, seem still more unreliable on foreign affairs. Yet this realm provides us with case after case, past and present, in which the vocabulary of accusing, forgiving, and forgetting, however inappropriate, will nonetheless be asked to do what it can do, that is, to mediate between international politics and an individual scale and sense of what is and isn’t right. When pundits advise us not to play “the blame game,” a phrase insinuating our well-established agreement that the game itself is blameworthy, should we take their advice? Can countries forgive? Can they be forgiven? Surrounded as we are by statements about what Elazar Barkan calls “the guilt of nations,” we have no choice but to find out more about the general cultural resources instructing us on these matters. And if comparison reveals a significant difference here between opinion on the street and the
credentialed wisdom of the experts, we need to know that as well.

I also find these opening quotations compelling points of reflection because they respond to a situation in the Middle East that is like—if you will permit me an insidious but to me unavoidable moment of national comparison—like that of the United States after September 11, 2001, a situation in which a claim to victimhood is put forward by a population seen widely from without as victimizers rather than victims. This rhetorical likeness is also one source of uneasy fascination in W.G. Sebald’s book On the Natural History of Destruction— in the original German, “The Air War and Literature”— which I will discuss at some length.7

The topic of the two lectures that comprise this book was again a silence that was also a refusal to blame: silence about the sufferings of German civilians in cities devastated by Allied bombers in World War II, a catastrophic experience that Sebald argues took half a century even to begin working its way into the national consciousness or the national literature. The most evident explanation for this silence, the explanation Sebald mentions once early on and then returns to at the end of his text, is again a practice of national comparison: a comparison with the sufferings Germany caused. It is this comparison, however implicit, that plausibly leaves the Germans, despite more than half a million dead, unable to believe in their absolute victimhood, hence unable to narrate or perhaps even to remember. On the last page, Sebald notes “the fact that the real pioneering achievements in bomb warfare—Guernica, Warsaw, Belgrade, Rotterdam—were the work of the Germans” (104). “The majority of Germans today know, or so at least it is to be hoped, that we actually provoked the annihilation of the cities in which we once lived” (103). If there was never an “open debate” in Germany about the strategic or moral justification for the Allied bombing, he says, it was “no doubt mainly because a nation which
had murdered and worked to death millions of people in its camps could hardly call on the victorious powers to explain the military and political logic that dictated the destruction of the German cities. It is also possible . . . that quite a number of those affected by the air raids, despite their grim but impotent fury in the face of such obvious madness, regarded the great firestorms as just punishment, even as an act of retribution on the part of a higher power with which there could be no dispute” (14). What better motive for silence than the conviction, as Christopher Hitchens puts it in his review of the book, that “well, what goes around comes around” (186)?

This hypothesis is intriguing, to begin with, because it’s so obviously not what a majority of Americans decided after 9/11. If not, then why not? What it would take for Americans now to respond the way Germans did after 1945? Am I breaking Stephen Howe’s rule in conceiving this question? But the hypothesis also invites further and more serious scrutiny because Sebald himself does not appear to believe it. If he did believe it, why would he have written thousands and thousands of words accusing the Germans of their failure to remember? Why did he go on to treat the silence as something like a crime, and an unsolved one? According to Volker Hage in his 2003 book on literary reactions to the air war, Zeugen der Zerstörung (Witnesses to the Destruction), German critics have often insisted, against Sebald, that the German silence was self-conscious and entirely appropriate: “if one measured the suffering of the perpetrating nation against the horror that Germany and its henchmen had brought to the conquered peoples of the East and above all those sacrificed to the design of racial elimination,” then, as one of them put it, “Perhaps the silence concealed a shame that is more precious than any literature” (118-119).

In what he modestly describes as unsystematic notes, Sebald offers several very different
interpretations of the German silence. Sometimes he suggests, restricting all blame to the bombers, that these “true stories . . . exceeded anyone’s capacity to grasp them” (23). The word “capacity” is stressed. “The death by fire within a few hours of an entire city, with all its buildings and its trees, its inhabitants, its domestic pets, its fixtures and fittings of every kind, must inevitably have led to overload, to paralysis of the capacity to think and feel in those who succeeded in escaping” (25). The magnitude of the experience seems, like Kant’s mathematical sublime, to defy all comparison, making a demand for representation that cannot be refused, on the one hand, while at the same time and by the same token, that very magnitude makes adequate representation impossible. The absolute horror of the firestorms, the inhuman scale and speed of the death and destruction, simply exceeded the capacities of the human senses and/or the categories of the human mind. As in media discussions of so-called “compassion fatigue,” the size and shape of the human container are considered to set more or less absolute limits to how much suffering can be taken in and digested before people turn off or tune out.

According to Andreas Huyssen, this account of the German response to the bombing is less than totally accurate: “there always was a lot of talk about the bombings in postwar Germany.” Another problem with Sebald’s hypothesis might be called its technologism. Like Walter Benjamin’s parable in “The Storyteller” of how the technology of long-distance killing in World War I undermined the “experience” of the soldiers, hence also their ability to tell stories, it suggests that technology, whether expanding our destructive powers or expanding the scope of our senses, necessarily collides with the capacities of the individual rational mind, conceived as fixed and finite. The ability to kill from further and further away, so that the combatants finally need not see each other at all, is of course a real truth about the history of modern warfare. Yet
the conclusions drawn from it seem to rely on implicit contrast with a universal “face-to-face” norm or model of comprehensible, communicable violence. And this model lends itself to all sorts of ethical and political confusions, among them 1) a naturalizing of local and national belonging at the expense of long-distance affiliations and commitments, as if the latter were less natural and less real, and 2) the delusion that physical proximity acts as a kind of natural brake or impediment to violence. The canonical wisdom on bombing is articulated in Eric Hobsbawm’s history of the world from 1914 to 1991, *The Age of Extremes*. Hobsbawm describes “the new impersonality of warfare, which turned killing and maiming into the remote consequences of pushing a button or moving a lever. Technology made its victims invisible, as people eviscerated by bayonets, or seen through the sights of firearms could not be. . . . Far below the aerial bombers were not people about to be burned and eviscerated, but targets. Mild young men, who would certainly not have wished to plunge a bayonet in the belly of any pregnant village girl, could far more easily drop high explosives on London or Berlin, or nuclear bombs on Nagasaki . . . The greatest cruelties of our century have been the impersonal cruelties of remote decision, of system and routine“ (50).12 By flattering the mildness of the mild young men, this indictment of technologically-mediated impersonality as such cries out for the sarcasm it receives from media critic Thomas Keenan, encountering a version of it in a recent online discussion of the war in Iraq: “Yeah, I think we all share a longing for the good old days when killing was up close and personal, when you really had to see your enemy (‘whites of their eyes,’ and all that) before the slaughter could begin, when war was real and effective, not this inefficient but easy virtual game stuff. Like, um, in April and May and June of 1994, when those interahamwe guys . . . in Rwanda set the current world record for temporally-concentrated
killing, 800,000 to 1,000,000 people dead in 100 days." Or, to take another sort of example, when the ancient Israelites killed all of the neighboring Midianites except the nubile virgins, one cannot say the genocide was hindered by the primitiveness of their weaponry. It’s possible to negotiate between these two positions, for example by insisting, as in Mahmood Mamdani’s book on Rwanda and Joanna Bourne’s book on “face-to-face killing in 20th century warfare,” on how much ideological work has become necessary in order to turn everyday mildness into face-to-face murder. Still, the automatic ethical effects supposedly caused by the military technology of remoteness seem as questionable in relation to bombing as in relation to video games.

The remoteness-makes-cruelty-easier argument, which seems obscurely linked to the proposition that being-bombed-makes-narrative-difficult, often comes accompanied by just that ironic corollary to which Keenan alludes: the suggestion that bombing doesn’t actually work. This may well have been the case in World War II, as Sebald claims (correctly, according to most authorities). It was certainly the case in Vietnam and again—from the perspective of “winning the peace”—now in Iraq. But there is something strange in the repeated yoking of remoteness both to psychological ease and to strategic ineffectuality. There are blatant historical cases like the Gulf War or the ousting of Saddam Hussein or the many other colonial wars documented by Sven Lindqvist in his History of Bombing where, for better or worse, bombing did work, at least in the sense of achieving its aims. We seem to be in the presence here of a counter-factual but deeply embedded cultural narrative.

Sebald suggests at first that the bombing, strategically irrelevant, was pursued nonetheless as an attempt to break the “morale” (17) of the Germans, while it was also seen as
“essential for bolstering British morale” (18). Then he goes further. The bombing was not merely a piece of bad planning, based on nothing more solid than phantasmatic projections of future “morale.” It was not merely a strategic mistake, something the Allies hoped would shorten the war but didn’t. It was irrational in its very essence. Sebald quotes with approval Elaine Scarry’s conclusion from *The Body in Pain*: “the victims of war are not sacrifices made as the means to an end of any kind, but in the most precise sense are both the means and the end in themselves” (19-20). In effect, this is an alternative explanation for the failure of German memory.  

If the bombing was fundamentally irrational, if it did not even respond to the strategic self-interest of the Allies, if in that sense it was incomprehensible, then its incomprehensibility would of course also make it harder for the victims to fix the bombing in narrative or in memory. And it would become that much easier to nudge the bombing and the Holocaust closer to equivalence.

This oblique commitment to incomprehensibility would also explain why Sebald lays the responsibility of remembering on literature rather than some other form of discourse, while simultaneously making it impossible for literature to fulfil this responsibility. He asks literature not merely to preserve “traces of pain,” as eyewitness accounts might do just as well, but to make the pain “comprehensible” (10), to tell us “what it all actually meant” (4). Telling us what it all actually meant entails something much more strenuous. Indeed, for Sebald it is self-contradictory and ultimately unattainable. He speaks of literature as an attempt “to make sense of the senseless” (49)—a characteristically no-win formulation that somehow leaves him free to accuse anyway, even though “sense” itself, could it be achieved, might then be understood as proof of literature’s failure to do justice to the event or to *be* literature. Logically enough, he
accuses every literary text that did treat the bombing of doing so badly, and badly precisely to
the extent that it is, indeed, literary: because it uses plot, style, self-conscious artifice, and so on
rather than simply recording the observed facts.

The cultural narrative that subtly turns the inefficiency of bombing into the irrationality
of bombing is a strangely comforting one, I would suggest, for it allows the system to replace the
individual as the source or site of a fundamental irrationality, and thus—this seems to be the
intent of Scarry’s overeager embrace of the irrationality of war as well—it manages to save the
rationality of the individual. In preserving the freedom to remember or not, it also preserves a
responsibility to remember, and with the responsibility it allows leverage for Sebald’s
indignation that they did not remember. Psychoanalysis, which of course rejects such
assumptions about the fundamental rationality of the individual, is not one of Sebald’s preferred
modes of explanation. Though he occasionally refers to “repression,” quoting for example
Enzensberger’s theory that the “mysterious energy” behind the German economic recovery came
in part from repression of their “total degradation” (12-13) in the bombings, he more often seems
to prefer a humanistic vocabulary which suggests a greater degree of individual freedom to
remember or not. In that freedom, as I said, lies a mandate for Sebald’s indignation. Sebald
comes closer than Enzensberger to saying, indignantly, that his post-war compatriots wanted to
forget merely in order to concentrate on making money.

Here I open a brief parenthesis concerning national comparison in general. Clearly one
of its functions is to affront. Explaining the bipartisan French vote in 2004 for Jacques Chirac in
order to stop the far-right nationalist Jean-Marie Le Pen, Perry Anderson writes, “The second
round duly gave him a majority of 82 per cent, worthy of a Mexican president in the heyday of
the PRI. On the Left Bank, his vote reached virtually Albanian proportions” (14).\textsuperscript{17} Albania and Mexico are terms of abuse, yes, but there is no obvious inaccuracy here to which a Mexican or Albanian chauvinist might legitimately object. (For contrast, consider Michael Moore’s visual references to “the coalition of the willing” in Fahrenheit 9/11.) Objection might perhaps be made to the assumption that France really is, or ought to be, different in its expectations of democratic diversity from Mexico and Albania. Is Anderson expressing a sort of Great Power arrogance? If so, he is also, and unexpectedly, holding open a zone of free will. Playing on the presumed incongruity between French and Albanian versions of democracy, he appeals to the possibility of doing a better job than the French, at least, seem to be doing. If you are proud enough to think that your democracy works better than Albania’s, he tells the French, then prove it—you can. In the same mode he tells the English that if the French could make a bourgeois revolution, then they can too; comparison reveals that it can be done, for somewhere it \textit{has} been done. Anderson, whose structural, anti-humanist, somewhat deterministic version of Marxism makes him constitutionally skeptical of all appeals to the will, finds in the language of national comparison an oblique, somewhat backhanded means of expressing exhortation, which is to say implying the existence of freedom, hence accountability—his equivalent of Sebald’s indignation at his fellow Germans.

The link between Sebald’s equivocations as to the cause of the German silence and his defense of the rational individual appears in an early passage where he speaks of the so-called “literature of the ruins” as “probably influenced by preconscious self-censorship— a means of obscuring a world that could no longer be presented in comprehensible terms” (10). If the world could no longer be presented in comprehensible terms, then one would think it was already
obscure enough. What was there to be gained by seeking to obscure it further? It’s as if Sebald wants to blame the survivors (they were surely trying to gain something) without being quite sure on what grounds the blame is deserved. The next two lines compound this ambiguity.

“There was a tacit agreement, equally binding on everyone, that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself was not to be described. The darkest aspects of the final act of destruction, as experienced by the great majority of the German population, remained under a kind of taboo like a shameful family secret, a secret that perhaps could not even be privately acknowledged” (10). This “not to be described” (in German, “nicht beschrieben werden” [18]) does not suggest something by its very nature “indescribable,” as one might think, so much as a self-imposed imperative not to describe— an imperative that, like any other imperative, one could choose either to obey or not to obey, and might be blamed for not obeying.

Yet this same passage also gives an indication that the forces involved might have to be obeyed, might be too unquestionably overpowering for even the staunchest will to withstand. The German term translated above as “ruin” is Vernichtung, more literally “destruction” or “annihilation,” but also “extermination,” the very word (I quoted it a minute ago from the Hage book) that has stuck to the Nazi “extermination camps.” This is a strong verbal hint of equivalence between what was done by the Nazis in the extermination camps and what was done by the Allies in the German cities. It attributes the silence of the German survivors in the cities to a trauma of memory no less cataclysmic than that suffered by the survivors of the camps.

Here Sebald is breaking Howe’s “he who mentions the Nazis first” rule. Or perhaps I should say that he is breaking down that rule— playing the game of comparative national blame
so as to undermine the absolute and incomparable authority of the Nazi example. As I suggested
earlier, it remains unclear whether this authority is something that Howe himself, while eager to
reject a rhetorical figure of instantly legitimized hatred, is also eager to preserve.

How should we feel about this comparison? We would certainly be within our rights if
we protested, worrying for example about how comparison threatens to devalue the privileged
term and thus about an apparent step toward the “normalization” of the Holocaust. But perhaps
a better response would be to take seriously the comparison of Allied bombing to German camps
and, like Sven Lindqvist, follow it out. “In both cases,” Lindqvist writes, “it was a question of a
well-organized mass murder of innocent people, sanctioned at the highest level but contrary to
international law. . . . [Here I’m leaving out some details.] But the difference between the
German and the British war crimes is . . . also very clear. In the first place, the order of
magnitude in the two cases is completely different. . . . The allied bombing offensive against
Germany claimed about half a million civilian lives. That is less than the margin of error
surrounding the Germans’ crime. In the second place, the victims of the Germans were almost
completely defenseless . . . Up to the conclusion of the war, Germany’s cities defended
themselves energetically; the graves of 56,000 British airmen testify to that fact . . . And in the
third place, the British had no plans for a conquest that would require the killing of Germans in
order to make room for British settlement . . . The air attacks against Germany stopped as soon
as the German armed forces had surrendered. The German war crimes, on the other hand, were
committed for the most part after the surrender of their opponents” (97).\(^9\) Reading this
instructive page, one wishes that Sebald had focused less on “the experience itself,” horrific as it
was, and more on national comparison. For comparison, risky as it is, does not necessarily end
in the equivalence of all suffering.

But wait—maybe the equivalence of all suffering is precisely where we want to end? The warm welcome Sebald’s lectures have received outside Germany undoubtedly owes a great deal to what might be called the human rights consensus. By “human rights consensus” I mean, in this context at least, a general willingness to extract civilian suffering from its historical (national, causal) contexts, from all narratives of provocation, collective responsibility, just retaliation, or “what goes around comes around.” If we have come to feel— I concede it’s a genuine “if”—that remembering what the Nazis did in the Holocaust and to cities like Guernica should not stop us from remembering the sufferings inflicted by the Allies on German civilians, the obvious reason would be that we have ceased to identify German civilians sufficiently with the Nazis, or even as Germans. We have come to think that they can and must be detached from their national belonging, at least for this purpose, that they must be protected from it and treated instead as abstract individuals. If human rights has become a new secular religion, as is sometimes proposed, this might be described as an essential precept of the new creed. Each human rights violation, we now believe, is absolutely unique and must be looked at alone, without regard for mitigating circumstances, guilty histories, yesterday’s actions by today’s victims, comparisons of any sort. The discourse of human rights radically amends the Israeli street wisdom with which I began: nobody’s country is any better than anybody else’s country, and therefore no one should shut up. Everyone has a right to speak about their own as well as everyone else’s country, no matter what their own country may have done. Belonging to a given country is morally irrelevant. The nervous backward glance at one’s own national history and the guilt or shame it carries should be no impediment to speech or indeed to action.
It's worth noting that Sebald's success in resuscitating the memory of how Germany's cities were destroyed owes something to the passage of time, which (in contrast to what is usually said about time in Sebald) here seems to indicate not melancholy decay but, more happily, the lifting of a burden, the removal of a blockage. But time does not work this miracle alone. Sebald also gets direct support from human rights cosmopolitanism as I've just described it. His defense of the abstract rational individual is consistent with a non-national, radically individualist, and relatively guilt-free world view, a world view he would perhaps have been more exposed to in England than in Germany. Speaking for myself, I can't imagine ever stepping entirely outside this world view, and especially not on the subject of saturation bombing. And yet I think it's also necessary to consider its possible limits, limits that are relevant both to an understanding of Sebald and to an understanding of the world since 9/11, and that may lead us back after all to the practice of national comparison that human rights cosmopolitanism would seem to be trying to supersede.

To articulate the human rights position is to be aware immediately that it is not quite Sebald's position, or not all of it. In various ways, in this text and others, Sebald tries quite hard to seek out a connection between the bombing and his own infant life, to show that "this catastrophe . . . left its mark on my mind" (viii). Like references to the "great American novel," his complaint that no one has written "the great German epic" of this period can only be read as the demand for a certain affirmation of nationhood. Notorious self-exile and fervent cosmopolitan that he was, Sebald also seemed to be trying to negotiate some new mode of belonging to Germany.

This is not an effort with which anyone, even a would-be cosmopolitan, should want to
interfere. There is no excuse for the Allied commanders who, knowing they were bombing civilians and facing evidence that they were doing so to no rational end, nevertheless imposed national belonging on Germany's civilians from above. Yet national belonging, whether imposed or negotiated, can never be far from the mind of anyone trying to prevent or redress or even win recognition for atrocities like these. Here we cosmopolitans may have something to learn from the wisdom of the street, which (like the psychoanalysis of national trauma) takes for granted on manifestly insufficient evidence that nations can be treated as if they were persons, hence capable of such actions as forgiving, showing mercy, and apologizing. Consider some the progressive political causes that cannot possibly succeed without an increase in the sentiment of national belonging. Efforts to win agreement about reparations and restitution (for US slavery, say, or for our treatment of Native Americans) often founder on the issue of national belonging, especially across time. They run up against a refusal to acknowledge, on the part of descendants of the perpetrators, that they do belong in a sufficiently powerful sense so as to justify present sacrifices in compensation for acts that they themselves did not commit. And they run up against a refusal to acknowledge that the descendants of the victims deserve to receive reparations for harms done not to them directly but only to their ancestors. The cohesiveness and continuity of national belonging are stretched even more drastically in the case of recent immigrants who are asked to accept (in the form of taxation, for example) part of the guilt for crimes against slaves or native inhabitants even though neither they nor their ancestors were present when the crimes were committed. Radical individualism in the human rights style, which asserts that nothing done by the collectivity ought to have any weight for you unless you yourself choose it as your own, will discourage people from acknowledging the benefits they inherit, without having lifted
a finger, on the basis of someone else's primordial crimes. Yet white Americans continue to benefit from a racialized structure of property ownership that goes all the way back to slavery. Immigrants who come to former settler colonies like the United States, Canada, and Australia benefit directly from the land that others took away from the indigenous people. The crimes and benefits constitute an unconscious belonging that only political effort can perhaps render conscious and eventually channel into compensatory policy.

All these devious tracks of causality are relevant to my own life, but I should perhaps confess that the causal line leading to this essay is also more direct and more personal. During World War II my father was the pilot of a B-17, or Flying Fortress, the largest bomber the Army Air Corps possessed. His squadron flew out of the area of southeastern England where Sebald would later visit and describe the lonely remains of the bases. When he took his plane over Germany in 1944 and 1945, he wanted above all to get back all in one piece, and I don’t think he could afford to be over-scrupulous about where his bombs fell. In trying to hit his assigned targets, which he told me were industrial targets, he certainly wasn’t trying to give the post-war US economy the huge relative advantage that he would discover when he got home in 1946, an advantage that would ease the way to precipitous upward mobility for him and to a much easier childhood for me than he or my mother had had. But in this sense, among others, my childhood, like Sebald’s, is part of the bombing. One might say the two childhoods are two tiny points on the enormous circle of the same event.

I say this with a mixture of pride and shame. In its emotional logic, at least, acknowledgment of benefits received as the result of an earlier generation’s acts of violence and injustice would seem to resemble the more traditional acknowledgment of indebtedness to the
heroic deeds and virtuous sacrifices of founding fathers. (In my own father’s case, at least, it’s probably too late for me to disentangle the two.) In insisting on a debt to those who came before, both will inevitably seem to re-state a position—the premise of a debt too large ever to be repaid—that is essentially theological. To see oneself as an accomplice after the fact to theft and other crimes is the functional equivalent, that is, of seeing oneself as born into a state of sin and requiring divine grace. Ideally one would like a less theological foundation for the need to temper the law with forgiveness, for the risky regress of looking before as well as at any individual’s actions and thus diluting or dispersing personal responsibility for them, for the imperative to hold the law open, allowing at least intermittent entry to the sorts of extra-legal supplement with which the contributors to this volume are concerned.

My argument here has been that this debt explains why national belonging cannot be simply disavowed, and thus also why we cannot wholeheartedly embrace the blithe cosmopolitan individualism of the human rights consensus, which would encourage us to condemn the Allied bombardment of Germany simply, without giving any thought to the German actions that preceded it. (How much and what kind of difference that thought should make are questions too complex for me to take on here.) It is worth pointing out that such debts are not necessarily shared with fellow nationals alone; like our strongest loyalties, they do not magically disappear the moment we step across the nation’s borders. So if this argument leads away from cosmopolitanism in one sense—in its hesitation toward the individualist impulse of human rights discourse—it leads back to cosmopolitanism in another sense. In its insistence that stepping outside one’s nation in order to criticize and/or apologize for it, thereby acknowledging a trans-national or cosmopolitan standard, seems to require a prior psychological identification with the
nation, a sense of national belonging. It seems entirely plausible, to take the case most pertinent to this essay, that Sebald refused to accept the possibility that his fellow Germans blamed themselves for the Allied bombing, and that he refused at the same time the practice of comparative national blaming, in part because of a failure or deficiency in his own sense of national belonging. Pursuing the parallel, it would seem to follow that if we want to make Americans more cosmopolitan, we may have to start by first trying to make them better Americans.

As I said at the outset, this essay has been largely inspired by the fraught, controversial parallel between Americans since 9/11 and other possible claimants to the title of victimhood who accepted—more (like the Germans since 1945) or less (like the Israelis since 1948)—the responsibility for having victimized others. A great deal more might be said, of course, about each of these parallels. Andreas Huyssen has written very powerfully against the abusive mobilization of German memories of the Allied bombardment even in the excellent cause of opposing recent American bombing campaigns. As for the United States, the rage for retribution that led the American public to accept its government’s invasion and occupation of Iraq, even in the glaring absence of any evidence of Iraqi involvement in the 9/11 attacks, would seem to indicate that American mechanisms of national blame are functioning only too well. But this is not to say that what Americans need is a more fervent commitment to forgiveness.

“Forgiveness is a power held by the victimized,” Martha Minow writes, “not a right to be claimed.” To decide in advance that peace must be privileged over justice, reconciliation over truth, is to exercise a form of moral absolutism every bit as oppressive as the familiar claim to victimized innocence. To live in the world as a responsible political agent is to forego the
dubious certainty that one can foreknow such things about each and every situation that will present itself. There is no permanent title to the high moral ground. Thus Minow suggests, in my view correctly, that “[p]erhaps forgiveness should be reserved, as a concept and a practice, to instances where there are good reasons to forgive” (17). Theological and for that matter deconstructive arguments for forgiveness, which share an insistence on forgiveness in the absence of good reasons to forgive, usefully insist on the inadequacy of those reasons which are offered and accepted, whether for forgiveness or for blame. But surely there would be no rejoicing in either camp if reasons were taken as good at the level of the individual but not at the level of the nation, so that individuals could be blamed but nations could not–if nations were taken to enjoy a sort of corporate-like limited liability that, grounded in the supposed incommensurability of scale between moral individual and impersonal state, prevented questions of responsibility from ever being asked. The word we use in order to insist on the connection between those scales is politics. Politically speaking, the state of the world does not permit us the luxury of a universal, pre-emptive absolution where national blame is concerned.

I have suggested here that in order to blame our own nation, as modern Americans have no ethical choice but to learn to do, modern Americans must forego the pleasures of detachment, pleasures that human rights individualism has made dangerously accessible and that overlap with the presumed ethical superiority of forgiveness. In order to be forgiven, and perhaps eventually also in order to forgive others, we must first acknowledge that we belong. In the concluding chapter of The Spectre of Comparisons, Benedict Anderson proposes an effectively low-key mode for such an acknowledgment: not national pride, but national shame. One can see the difference between nationalism and religion, he says, “if one tries to transform ‘My Country,
Right or Wrong’ into ‘My Religion, Right or Wrong.’ The latter is an inconceivable oxymoron. How could Islam for Muslims, Christianity for Christians, Hinduism for Hindus possibly be Wrong?” (360). But one’s country can be Wrong. And this conviction coexists with—indeed, is made possible by— the complementary conviction that one’s country can and should be made Right. The country can be blamed because, like the individual, it is a site of some quantity of free will. Anderson declares his desire to propagate the slogan “Long Live Shame!” (362). There are worse slogans.
Notes

1. Stephen Howe, “Israel, Palestine, and the Campus Civil Wars,” *Open Democracy* (December 14, 2004). The passage continues: “By that measure, all sides in polemics over the middle east have long since lost: comparing each other to Nazis has become the routine, shop-soiled and ever-devaluing currency of dispute.”


4. See for example Charles Bernheimer, ed., *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). In his introduction, entitled “The Anxieties of Comparison,” Bernheimer writes: “The more literatures you try to compare, the more like a colonizing imperialist you may seem. If you stress what these literatures have in common—thematically, morally, politically— you may be accused of imposing a universalist model that suppresses particular differences so as to foster the old humanist dream of man’s worldwide similarity to man. If, on the other hand, you stress differences, then the basis of comparison becomes problematic” (9).

of making illegitimate use of “an undisclosed model of Other Countries” (37), or what he refers to as “inverted Podsnappery” (36). Podsnap, in Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend, is the patriot who proclaims that “No Other Country is so Favoured as This Country.” Thompson imagines Anderson and Nairn as answering the question of how other countries do as follows: “They do—we are sorry to be obliged to say it—in Every Respect Better. Their Bourgeois Revolutions have been Mature. Their Class Struggles have been Sanguinary and Unequivocal. Their Intelligentsia has been Autonomous and Integrated Vertically... Their Proletariat has been Hegemonic” (37). In his defense, Anderson might have insisted on the difference between using a national model and not disclosing that model. In English Questions (London: Verso, 1992), which reprints the original essays of the early 60s to which Thompson was objecting, Anderson accepts “the justice of [Thompson’s] criticism” (4) and discloses the model: “The standard is provided by France” (5). Anderson acknowledges that he was excessively influenced by Gramsci, whose comparison of advanced France with belated Italy inspired Anderson’s own comparison of a mature France with a premature England. Whatever the failings of the French model, there surely exists a better case in favor of national comparison in general than Anderson, a master of the art, seems willing for the moment to make.


8. Even in the immediate aftermath Germans may well have agreed with Churchill, Sebald writes, that there was “a higher poetic justice at work” (19).


12. Thus the supposed ease and geometrical clarity of bombing, seen from the bomber’s aerial point of view, could be counterposed to the difficulty of remembering bombing, from the point of view of the victims on the ground.


16. This romantic tendency in Sebald, visible also in other works, seems sometimes to be complaining more about the modernization that followed the bombs than about the bombs themselves, as when he speaks, for example, of “a second liquidation... of the nation’s own past history” (7).


18. And if they were, of course, then the individual would be redeemed from the shame of having chosen not to remember.


21. Time seems Sebald’s enemy, elsewhere in his writing, in that it makes atrocities into classics, whitens the bones, dilutes the moral absoluteness of suffering.

22. In *Nation and Identity* (London and NY: Routledge, 1999), Ross Poole writes interestingly for example about the issue of whether recent Australian immigrants from Europe and Asia can and should be induced to share responsibility for white crimes against aboriginals, even though they obviously weren’t there to participate in the crimes.


26. Of course, no one belongs only to the nation, and the diversity of debts to other collectivities loosens the individual’s responsibility to each. Acknowledging debts to the nation, even unliquidatable debts, need not entail treating the nation as a single, Alcoholics Anonymous-style higher power.