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Vergangenheitsbewältigung ^[1] in the USA

On the Politics of the Memory of Slavery

The settlement of the North American continent was ... a consequence not of any higher claim in a democratic or international sense, but rather of a consciousness of what is right which had its sole roots in the conviction of the superiority and thus of the right of the white race.

Adolf Hitler,

1932 ^[2]

It seems that wherever one turns these days questions of how to deal with difficult pasts have risen to the top of national and international agendas. ^[3] The general premise of this paper is that the USA has not yet adequately dealt with the many forms of racial injustice endemic to its national past. And the expectation animating it is that our thinking about this failure, its consequences, and possible remedies for it can be sharpened by drawing upon the German case, particularly Germany's renewed efforts in the 1980s and 1990s to face the painful truth of the National Socialist past of the 1930s and 1940s. In that situation, the forum in which public memory was exercised and consciousness raised was a debate among historians -- a *Historikerstreit* -- that spilled over into public awareness. That peculiar circumstance allowed the links between changing public memory and changing political culture and collective identity to appear in sharp relief. One key issue in that debate concerned the role that Anti-Semitism, as a racialized mode of perception and interaction, played in the Holocaust. Others concerned the collective liability of present-day Germans for state-sanctioned and state-implemented atrocities in the past; the cultural, and political costs of suppressing painful memories and refusing to mourn; the relation of professional to popular history, and of both to public sites and rituals of commemoration; and the forms of patriotism and collective identity suitable to a democratic society with an oppressive past. In these and other respects, the German historians debate may throw some additional light on our own tortured attempts to come to terms with a past of racial injustice. ^[4]

I shall focus here on only one of the major constellations of racial injustice that disfigure our past and present, the one associated with racial slavery and its aftermath. The "logics" and "dynamics" of the constellations associated

with the near extermination of Native Americans, the forceful subjection of the inhabitants of territories conquered from Mexico, the involuntary incorporation of native Hawaiians, Puerto Ricans, and Alaskan Eskimos, and the exclusion or oppression of various groups of immigrants are sufficiently different to warrant separate treatments. Moreover, it is the black/white divide that has most deeply marked the topography of American racial politics from before the Civil War to the present day. Part I will focus on the recent debates in Germany concerning the role that publicly working through the past can play in reshaping national culture and identity. Part II will use insights gleaned from that discussion to review our own failure to come to terms with a past in black and white. I will conclude, in part III, with some thoughts on how public memory might figure in debates about policies that address the legacy of slavery and segregation.

I

From the close of World War II to the present, Germany has been engaged in an ongoing effort to come to terms with its Nazi past -- in shifting circumstances and with varying aims, approaches, and results. ^[5] Immediately after the War, a defeated and divided Germany had various measures relating to its recent past imposed upon it by the victorious allies -- war crimes trials, denazification procedures, reeducation processes, and the like. From 1949 through the early 1960s, however, dealing with the past was largely -- though not completely -- suspended, as energies were marshaled in the service of *Wiederaufbau*, or rebuilding. During that period, a general turning away from the Nazi period was supported by the dominant view, in public life and in the schools, that the twelve years of National Socialism were an aberration in German history foisted upon the people by Hitler and his henchmen. Reparations were made to Israel, the "economic miracle" proceeded apace under Adenauer and Erhard, and the Nazi affiliations of major public figures were concealed behind a wall of silence. A number of German intellectuals who grew to young adulthood under National Socialism and came to maturity after the War protested this curtailment of critical investigation into the past already in the late 1950s, but with limited effect until, in the second half of the 1960s, student radicalism and the accession of the Social Democrats to power tipped the balance in favor of a determined effort to come to terms with the past. As a result, and aided by new access to Nazi documents, in the 1970s there began a steady stream of scholarly studies that left little room for doubting or denying the character and extent of Nazi crimes, the complicity of various German elites, the widespread support among large segments of the population, or the roots of Nazism in German history and culture. But in the 1980s, after the Christian Democrats returned to power under Helmut Kohl, conservative intellectuals were encouraged to take advantage of the new political climate to reclaim political-cultural dominance from the left opposition. This was the setting for the well-known *Historikerstreit*,

or historians' debate, of the mid-1980s, which I shall be considering here. ^[6]

Ernst Nolte, Michael Stürmer, Andreas Hillgruber, and other professional historians undertook to reinterpret the events of the Nazi period in ways that reduced their singularity and enormity -- for instance, by comparing the Final Solution to other mass atrocities of the twentieth century, from the massacres of the Armenians by the Turks to the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. Indeed, the Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath also served as the major explanatory factor in their account of the recent German past: Hitler and Nazism were a response to the threat of Bolshevism from the East. In addition to "normalizing" and "historicizing" the Holocaust in these ways, historical work from this quarter also promoted a shift in perspective from solidarity with the victims of Nazism to solidarity with the valiant German troops fighting on the Eastern front and with ordinary Germans suffering through the war's grim end. There was, of course, a political-cultural point to all of this: it was time for Germany to leave behind its Nazi past, turn toward the future, and assume its rightful place among the leading nations of the world. It was worse than an intellectual error to view a proud German history solely through the distorting lens of a twelve-year aberration; it was a political failing as well, for it impeded formation of the strong national identity and confident national purpose needed for effective action in rapidly changing European and global settings. By that time, most of the country's inhabitants had been born after the War or had been too young during the Nazi period to bear any individual responsibility for it. Dwelling on a past that was not theirs served no better purpose than public self-flagellation and blocked the normal development of patriotic identification with the fortunes of the nation.

With such arguments, and in concert with their political allies, the conservative historians were putting revisionist history to public use in the interests of reshaping public memory -- and thus German self-understanding -- and of relieving public conscience so as to revitalize German patriotism. And it was precisely to this political-cultural challenge that Jürgen Habermas, Hans Mommsen, and other German left-liberal intellectuals responded in the *Historikerstreit*. ^[7] I want now to consider briefly their responses concerning the public use of history, and to do so from the interested standpoint of our own difficulties in coming to terms with the past.

The overriding political-cultural issue behind the historians dispute might be put as follows: what should be the attitude of present-day Germans toward a Nazi past in which most of them were not directly implicated? Often enough the collective past is a burden on the present, and the stronger the memories of it the greater the burden. If the past in question involves terrible crimes for which amends can never really be made, the problems for collective identity and collective action can be immense. With worries of this sort in mind, many Germans felt in the mid-1980s that forty years of dealing with the Nazi past was enough and that it was time for Germany to move on -- to reestablish continuities with the many glorious aspects of its history and traditions, to foster a more positive self-understanding,

and to play a more self-confident and self-interested role in international affairs than its postwar pariah status had permitted. Those who argued against this -- successfully in the end -- noted that the process of publicly facing the past had gotten fully underway only in the late 1960s and was already throttled in the early 1980s by the *Tendenzwende*, or change of direction, set in motion when the Christian Democrats regained power under Kohl. And the character of that change -- particularly the heavy-handed attempts to reverse the political-cultural accomplishments of the 1970s and to renew German patriotism, encapsulated by the infamous events at Bitburg in 1985 -- made it clear that Germany had not yet effectively worked through its past but was rather in the process of trying to repress it. ^[8] The questionable work of the conservative historians enlisted in these efforts only proved the point: professional history was being misused to improve Germany's weak self-image by touching up the ugly picture of its recent past.

There were, of course, historiographic criticisms of that work by other historians; but the line of criticism I want to focus on stressed rather the political implications of this effort to leave the painful past behind. Jürgen Habermas, in particular, advanced the argument that German national identity was inseparable from its historical consciousness, and that any major shifts in German public memory would leave their mark upon German self-understanding, with practical-political consequences. If those shifts were in the direction of denying and repressing the past instead of confronting and dealing with it, they would likely lead to forms of "acting out" rather than "working through," symptoms of which could already be discerned in German public life, most notably in various expressions of a mounting xenophobia. For what was at issue here was not a temporary aberration but a catastrophe with deep roots in German history and culture. Historians of the Holocaust had, for instance, pointed to a virulent strain of popular anti-Semitism as a contributing factor, a diagnosis later reinforced and sharpened in Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. ^[9] Long-standing, widespread, and deeply rooted views of German racial superiority and Jewish racial inferiority had shaped a popular mindset that was, Goldhagen argued, a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the attempted Judeocide. Even those born later, who bore no individual moral guilt in that connection, had a continuing responsibility to work up, on, and through such elements of German political culture in an effort to break with the past. Failure to do so, Habermas argued, would come back to haunt German public life, for allowing the motivational force of such beliefs and attitudes to persist would only heighten the risk of repeated outbreaks of racially imbued thinking and acting, as already evinced in the growing conflicts over asylum and immigration. It would also amount to a renunciation of Germany's collective obligation to make amends for the past and a show of disrespect for its many victims.

On this point, referring to Walter Benjamin's idea of reversing the usual triumphal identification with history's

winner for an anamnestic solidarity with its victims, Habermas writes: “There is the obligation incumbent upon us in Germany...to keep alive, without distortion, and not only in an intellectual form, the memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered by German hands...If we were to brush aside this Benjaminian legacy, our fellow Jewish citizens and the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of all those who were murdered would feel themselves unable to breathe in our country.”^[10] Public remembrances and commemorations of the suffering of victims -- through artistic as well as historical representations, in public rituals and public places, in school curricula and mass media -- play crucial roles in transforming traditions and in determining what will or will not be passed on to future generations. Whether or not past evils are kept present in public consciousness, whether or not their victims are still mourned, Habermas continues, are central elements of who “we” (Germans) are and who “we” want to be. For recognizing past evil as integral to German history, as issuing “from the very midst of our collective life” -- rather than as marginal or accidental to it -- “cannot but have a powerful impact on our self-understanding...and shake any naive trust in our own traditions.”^[11] It is, in fact, an essential ingredient in any genuine effort to re-form national identity *in full awareness* of the horrors that issued from its previous formation.

The unity of this “we” is, to be sure, by no means given: it is something that has to be continually shaped and reshaped in the public sphere. For in the politics of public memory there is usually a polyphony of voices, emanating from a diversity of “subject positions”: the voices of victims and perpetrators, of resisters and collaborators, of those directly involved and those who were born later, of different regions and cultures, races and classes, political ideologies and religious convictions, and so forth.^[12] In a democratic context, this means that representations of the past may be publicly contested from perspectives that are linked to conflicting understandings of the present and orientations toward the future. And in the resultant dialectic of past, present, and future, debates over what happened and why interpenetrate with differences of interest and concern, conviction and attitude, experience and hope among the various participants.^[13] This is so in the German debates and, as we shall see, even more so in the American -- where the immense presence of the descendants of slaves in the body politic gives the idea of solidarity with the victims of history a different political edge than it has in Germany, and where Southern views of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and their aftermath managed to gain a hegemony unlike anything to be found in the defeated Germany.

Another issue in the *Historikerstreit* was the extent to which historical scholarship can and should inform the politics of memory in the public sphere by, among other things, introducing an element of objectivity into what might otherwise become simply a matter of power. To be sure, the ideas of “objectivity” in question were, for the most part,

“postdeconstructive” rather than foundationalist.^[14] It was generally agreed that narratives and interpretations are not simply dictated by facts; that their construction is always informed by the historians’ questions, interests, standpoints, temporal positions, and the like; and that there is no absolute divide between facts and interpretations, but rather a continuous spectrum. However, the latitude for reasonable disagreement is palpably different at different points in the spectrum. As one moves in the “factual” direction, the constraints imposed by the evidence -- documents, eyewitness reports, quantitative data, and so forth -- significantly narrow the range of reasonable disagreement. The critical use of such sources by the community of historical scholars results in the elimination of many proposed interpretations, as the factual claims and presuppositions germane to them are submitted to critical scrutiny -- as happened, for example, with the “Auschwitz lie” and the “Lost Cause” view of the Civil War. For though historical judgment is unavoidable, it is exercised in critical dialogue with a community of historians that can and often does achieve something approaching unanimity with regard to how the available sources bear upon the plausibility of this or that interpretation.^[15] And, as Saul Friedlander, Carlo Ginzburg, Jürgen Habermas, and others have argued concerning the historians debate over the Holocaust, if nonfoundationalist practices of objectivity and truth were not possible, there would be no lies, and might would make right, from which there could be no appeal to the evidence of historical inquiry.

The question of objectivity raises moral and ethical as well as epistemic issues; representations of the past can be faulted not only for their lies, distortions, or half-truths, but also for the unfairness they show and injustice they do to the victims of history. This can be seen, for instance, in the use, misuse, or nonuse a historian makes of the victims’ own testimonies and narratives, in how she or he “negotiates” the relationships among the competing “micronarratives” of perpetrators, victims, and onlookers, and between them and her or his own “macronarrative.”^[16] And the results of those negotiations have to be submitted to the scholarly community at large, where they will be renegotiated in the light of other judgments of fairness and ethical-political senses of solidarity. This becomes especially pressing when the descendants of victims live among “us” and experience disrespect for past suffering as a failure of solidarity in the present. As historical scholarship intersects with ethical-political debates about who “we” are and want to be as a people, about what is really in the common good and general interest, questions of doing justice to the victims of the past interpenetrate with questions of inclusion and exclusion in the present. Pablo De Greiff has put this point as follows: “we have an obligation to remember what our fellow citizens cannot be expected to forget,” in the normative sense of what we cannot reasonably expect them to forget.^[17]

What are we to make *politically* of these efforts to come to terms with the past? It is impossible to weigh their effects on West German political culture with any precision. There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that the changes have

been considerable. But how much of that is due to the external imposition of a democratic constitutional order and international pressure on its internal affairs, how much to the German “economic miracle” and widespread prosperity, how much to countless other factors not directly connected with the *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*, as Adorno called it, is difficult to say. On the other hand, we do have two strong comparative indicators of the political-cultural importance of publicly dealing with the Nazi past: Austria and East Germany. In Austria, which after the War represented itself as the passive victim of German Aggression, there was never more than superficial gestures in that direction. And the results have been clear for all to see. Though it too is democratic and prosperous, its politics is still haunted by specters of its Nazi past. At the latest, since the end of the 1980s, when Kurt Waldheim was elected President *after* it was disclosed that he had lied about his wartime past -- he had joined the German Army in 1938 and later served with units that were involved in war crimes in Yugoslavia and Greece – and *in spite of* the anti-Semitic overtones of his campaign, the return of the repressed has been unmistakable. Under Jörg Haider, the Austrian Freedom Party rapidly rose to prominence in the 1990s, regularly garnering about one-quarter of the popular vote and eventually joining in a ruling coalition with the conservative Austrian People’s Party. That it could do so on the basis of an anti-foreigner platform and accompanied by an only partly veiled anti-Semitic rhetoric elicited shocks of recognition in the rest of Europe. By contrast, West Germany’s neonationalist and xenophobic Republican Party, under Franz Schönhuber, enjoyed a comparatively brief rise at the end of the 1980s and to only a fraction of the height.

Yet closer to home, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the hasty unification of East and West Germany in 1990 provide another comparative perspective. For unlike the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic dealt only superficially with its Nazi past. The official legitimization of the postwar communist regime as the triumph and rule of antifascist forces made that unnecessary. And after unification, it was the Stalinist and post-Stalinist past that occupied public attention. But here, too, the return of the repressed was unmistakable. The anti-foreigner violence that exploded in the early 1990s and the generally xenophobic character of East German political culture made it clear that they had never worked through their Nazi past. It is, of course, true that after 1990 the process of reshaping an enlarged national identity for Germany as a whole was accompanied by various symptoms of political-cultural backsliding, including surges of neonationalism and xenophobia, and troubling appearances of anti-Semitism. But the worst of that came in the early 1990s, when the Christian Democrats exploited the conflict potential generated by the vastly altered and deeply asymmetrical political situation to put the issues of asylum, immigration, and “guest workers” at the top of the public agenda; and even then, it was much worse in the East than the West. In the West, the spontaneous popular protests against anti-foreigner violence, the rising opposition to nativist politics, and

the continuing hold on the public mind of a civic nationalism defined by the liberal and democratic principles of the Basic Law made clear how great the discontinuities with the past had become. This is not to say that Germany has fully “mastered” its Nazi past; there is ample indication that this is certainly not the case. It is only to say that the politics of memory practiced there since the 1960s has had a profound effect upon its political culture and national identity.

II

Using *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in postwar Germany to gain perspective on the politics of the memory of slavery in the USA might seem, on the face of it, to be a stretch. After all, it has been nearly a century and a half since the end of slavery, and there have already been several rounds of intense public debate concerning it, in varying political circumstances, from post-Civil-War Reconstruction to the post-World-War II Civil Rights Movement. And yet, as historians of professional and public history have made clear, the politics of memory on this subject went badly from the time that four million, mostly penniless, propertyless, jobless, and illiterate former slaves were set adrift in the post-Civil-War South. After a brief, fiercely contested period of Reconstruction ending in 1877, the price paid for reunion was the re-establishment of white supremacy in the states of the former Confederacy.^[18] As it has sometimes been put, the South lost the war but won the peace. And part of winning the peace was a reversal of the usual rule that victors in war get to write history: the professional and public history of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction were dominated by pro-Southern, anti-black perspectives until after World War II. Only since the rise of the postwar Civil rights Movement has that hegemony been overturned among professional historians; and the matter is still unresolved in public historical consciousness.

One might suppose that with the founding of the American Historical Association in 1884, racist historiography would have waned as professional historians began to replace their amateur predecessors. But prior to World War I, the “scientific” history of race in America was largely based on “scientific” -- biological, anthropological -- racism; and historiographic “impartiality” took the form of avoiding “partiality” against the antebellum South in the interest of sectional reconciliation.^[19] Especially after the generation of historians who had living memories of the War and Reconstruction was displaced by generations who didn’t, the aim of building a national community of professional historians, free of sectional conflict, motivated the negotiation of a consensual version of slavery and its aftermath. And abetted by the pervasive racism of the period -- in the North and West as well as in the South, and across the boundaries of social class and political party -- professional historians did in fact manage to achieve a high degree of historiographic agreement along racist and nationalist lines. This included a romanticized version of antebellum

plantation life with softened images of slavery, a depiction of abolitionists and Radical Republicans as extremist agitators, and an account of the outrages of Reconstruction, replete with Southern white “scalawags,” grasping Northern “carpetbaggers,” and impudent black freedmen -- that is, just the sorts of views that were disseminated to the nation at large in Thomas Dixon’s fictional *The Clansman* (1907), D. W. Griffith’s film version of it, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Claude G. Bowers popular history of Reconstruction, *The Tragic Era* (1928), and countless other widely received portrayals.

In this process of historiographic convergence, “there was considerably more give on the northern side, more take on the southern.” One reason for this was “the near unanimous racism of northern historians” in this period, fostered by the rise not only of “scientific” racism and Social Darwinism, but also of American expansionism, Anglo-Saxonism, and consciousness of the white man’s “civilizing mission.”^[20] Another was the large number of Southern historians working in the North and the virtual absence of Northern historians employed in the South.^[21] Thus there were “no southern centers of pro-northern historiography to compare with [William A.] Dunning’s Reconstruction seminar at Columbia, which attracted scores of southern students, who under Dunning’s direction turned out a stream of studies” that dominated Reconstruction historiography for decades.^[22] And Southern historians employed in the South worked under very strong constraints to hold to the received version of slavery and its aftermath. Black historians dissented, to be sure, but their work was marginalized in the profession by the white mainstream -- John Hope Franklin was the first black historian to receive a regular appointment at a white institution, in 1956 -- and was consigned to non-mainstream venues, particularly the *Journal of Negro History* founded in 1916.^[23]

In the interwar period, especially in the 1930s, this ruling consensus, while remaining dominant, came under increasingly sharp attacks from different corners of the rapidly expanding ideological spectrum -- not only from racial egalitarians, black and white, but also from Northern and Southern liberals, and from Marxists and other left intellectuals.^[24] There were a number of influences at work here -- the new antiracist anthropology which challenged scientific racism, the repellent harshness of Southern racism as epitomized in the numerous lynchings, the critical interpretive frameworks provided by left political and social thought, and the rise of a new generation of dissident historians, North and South. But despite this breakdown in consensus, no alternative synthesis appeared until after World War II. Thus, the overtly racist views of slavery propounded in the extremely influential work of Ulrich B. Phillips had no effective competitors and was still being incorporated into best-selling textbooks like that coauthored by Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steel Commager in 1930, with numerous subsequent editions.^[25] Similarly, the

dominant view of Reconstruction propounded by Dunning and his students -- who represented it as a regime of humiliation imposed on the prostrate South by vindictive radicals and valiantly resisted by the knights of the Ku Klux Klan -- came under attack but was not displaced, and entered into public consciousness through incorporation into popular fiction, film, and history. And again, the views of black historians, some of whom were now Harvard-trained professionals, were disregarded by most orthodox historians of the South -- including the views advanced by W.E.B. Du Bois in his monumental *Black Reconstruction* (1935).^[26] Despite the continuing dominance of the racist orthodoxy, however, the underlying consensus among historians gave way in the interwar years to a conflict of interpretations.

The new antiracist synthesis toward which dissident historians had begun pointing in the 1930s finally took shape and achieved dominance after World War II. The horrors perpetrated by the Nazis under the banner of racial superiority and inferiority, the decline of scientific racism and Social Darwinism, the worldwide breakup of colonial empires, the exigencies of international competition during the Cold War, and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement gave wind to the writings of younger, heterodox historians who were formed in the interwar years.^[27] Works by historians of that generation, North and South, who were committed to racial equality began to appear in the 1950s and by the close of the 1960s had completely transformed the historiography of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction.

The politics of the public memory of slavery and its aftermath gained momentum in the 1880s and 1890s, driven by many of the same forces that drove historical scholarship and in much the same direction. The memory of the Civil War was particularly contested, for the meaning conferred on this great conflict in the nation's past was perceived to be closely connected to competing visions of the nation's future. In the end, "race" lost out to "reunion."^[28] The demands of sectional reconciliation were met by figuring the War as a fight between valorous brothers, while leaving the slavery and emancipation that were its cause and outcome in the shadows. This configuration also presented fewer obstacles to the re-establishment of white supremacy in the South, which generally met with less and less resistance as racism intensified in all regions of the country and the Republicans, in order to hold on to their Northern white constituency, increasingly distanced themselves from the politics of racial equality. By the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg in 1913, the central public commemoration could be staged as a "Great Reunion" among thousands of white veterans from both armies, with scarcely a mention of the Emancipation Proclamation, whose fiftieth anniversary also fell in that year. As the *Baltimore Afro-American Ledger* summed up the situation at that time: "Today the South is in the saddle, and with the single exception of slavery, everything it fought

for during the days of the Civil War, it has gained by repression of the Negro within its borders. And the North has quietly allowed it to have its own way.”^[29]

The last line proved to be an underestimation of the situation. That same year, the newly inaugurated Woodrow Wilson, in collaboration with the newly elected, Southern-Democrat dominated House and Senate, initiated a policy of racial segregation in federal government agencies, a policy that eventually expanded, especially under the New Deal, to include most federally sponsored programs in employment, training, and housing, among others, as well as in federal prisons and, as previously, in the armed services.^[30] That is to say, from that point until the 1950s or 1960s, federal agencies were not only a prime locus of racial segregation but also enforcers of the “separate but equal” dispensation and propagators of it throughout the land. And, as W.E.B. Du Bois noted in 1935, a segregated society required a segregated historical memory: there was a “searing of the memory” in America by white supremacist historiography and a public consciousness that had “obliterated” the black experience and the meaning of emancipation.^[31]

Given the enormous shifts in the historiography of slavery and its aftermath since the 1960s, one might suppose, especially in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the same to be true of public memory. And there have, to be sure, also been important changes in the latter; but those who study popular uses of history have repeatedly noted a significant gap between academic and public historical consciousness of these matters. “Generally Americans believe that slavery was a Southern phenomenon, date it from the antebellum period, and do not think of it as central to the American story.” They are generally ignorant of the fact that “by the time of the Revolution it had become a significant economic and social institution in every one of the thirteen colonies and would remain so in every region of the new nation well into the nineteenth century.”^[32] Moreover, many think of legally institutionalized racial oppression as ending with emancipation and know rather little about racial relations in the post-Reconstruction South; and most are quite ignorant of institutionalized racism in the rest of the country -- for instance, of the roles it played in the formation of the American working class in the nineteenth century, in structuring immigration policy and citizenship law throughout our history, and in the policies and programs of the federal government in the twentieth century.^[33] With the German discussions in mind, one might be tempted to say that though our *Historikerstreit* concerning slavery and its aftermath effectively ended, at least in regard to fundamentals, in the 1960s and 1970s, the process of public *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has only just begun.^[34]

A number of different reasons are offered for the lag in public historical consciousness. To begin with, there is

a clear popular preference for history that confirms rather than confronts positive portrayals of the nation's past. Thus in public memory, what Nathan Irwin Huggins called the "master narrative" of American history remains largely unshaken: "a national history teleologically bound to the Founders' ideals rather than their reality," an "inexorable development of free institutions and the expansion of political liberty," in which racial slavery and oppression are treated as regional "aberrations -- historical accidents to be corrected in the progressive upward reach of the nation's destiny."^[35] And then there is the appalling state of history instruction in the schools: "much of the best and latest scholarship never reaches high-school students because most high-school history courses are taught by teachers with inadequate training in history...In Louisiana, 88 percent of the students who take history in high school are taught by teachers who have not even a college minor in history. In Minnesota, the proportion is 83 percent, in West Virginia 82 percent, in Oklahoma 81 percent, in Pennsylvania, 73 percent, in Kansas 72 percent." Similarly, in Maryland, Arizona, South Dakota, and Mississippi, the percentages are 70 percent or greater.^[36] Nor is this failure generally remedied at the post-secondary level: US history courses are not required, even for liberal arts degrees, in more than 4/5 of our college and universities. But the most frequently mentioned reason for the gap is the continuing volatility of race relations: talk about racial injustice in the past is typically experienced, by both blacks and whites, as being also about the present, and reacted to accordingly. This is not only the case in the South, though the heightened activism of Southern heritage groups has exacerbated the difficulties there;^[37] it holds for whites across the country, and for blacks as well.^[38] In short, relations to the passions and interests of the present are integral to the politics of the memory of racial injustice and have to be addressed as such.

Like Germany and so many other countries, we too have a past that is still present, that refuses to pass away. And it is just the haunting presence of the past that the politics of public memory seeks to address. This type of cultural politics is, of course, not new. It is practiced everyday by public historians, museum curators, artists, writers, journalists, and others in mass communication; it is a familiar element of local and national politics; and it has historically resulted in various forms of institutionalized memory. I am attempting here only to delineate more sharply and underline more emphatically its irreplaceable role in our society. Until legal, institutional, normal, everyday racism is publicly and widely understood to have been *integral* to our history and identity as a nation, we will, I am suggesting, continue to encounter major obstacles to developing the degree of transracial political solidarity required for democratic solutions to the forms of racial injustice that are it's continuing legacy. Without a developed awareness of the sources and causes of our racialized practices and attitudes, we will, I suspect, continue to find it extremely difficult even to carry on reasonable public discussions of racially inflected problems, let alone arrive at just and

feasible solutions to them. As Nathan Irwin Huggins has put it, whites and blacks are “joined at the hip,” they have a “common story” and “share the same fate”; that is, they belong to the “same community” and cannot work out their futures independently of one another. [\[39\]](#)

But ours is a community of fate that has also historically been a land of immigration, and that complicates the politics of memory considerably. The diversity of subject positions in our society is marked not only by the differences of class, age, gender, and so forth found in any society, and by black/white racial differences and North/South sectional differences. It also includes positions connected with the conquest, settlement, and expansion of America, and with the policies and practices of US immigration. What does the politics of memory mean, for instance, to the large numbers of recent immigrants whose cultural memories take them back to other worlds? I cannot even begin to sort out these immense complications here; but I do want to argue that the responsibility to come to terms with the past of slavery and segregation is borne by the political community as a whole, regardless of ancestry. This is so not only because the horrors perpetrated were generally state-sanctioned and frequently state-implemented, that is to say, were corporate evils for which there is corporate responsibility; nor only because naturalized citizens who expect to share in the inherited benefits of a continuing enterprise must also share in its inherited liabilities. It is also because immigrant groups, whatever their prior background, unavoidably become “joined at the hip” to blacks and whites, become members of the same community of fate to which all our futures are tied. The black/white polarity has fixed the geography of the color-coded world to which successive waves of immigrants have had to adapt; there is no comprehending the bizarre ethnoracial categories into which Americans have been and still are forced apart from that polarization and its effective history. This is not at all to deny that Americans of diverse origins have their own histories to relate and their own politics of memory to pursue. It is merely to point out that the history of slavery and its aftermath has formed a template for those histories, that they have been shaped by it and, and that their fates have been inextricably entangled in the racialized politics that is its legacy.

This broad and deep diversity of subject positions is sure to be reflected in the democratic politics of public memory -- in rival narratives, conflicts of interpretation, and other forms of cultural-political contestation. There is no need for unanimity here, for one substantive version of the American past to which all parties subscribe; but if there is to be public communication across differences, citizens do have to see themselves as members of the same political project, defined in large part by overlapping interpretations of constitutional rights, principles, and values. This is not a matter of returning to pure origins or foundations; there can be no reasonable doubt that our foundations were fractured from the start. But it is also not a matter of simply condemning them, or burying them forever under heaps of criticism. It was, after all, the same motley of religious and philosophical ideas that was used to justify both slavery

and abolition, both segregation and its dismantling. The politics of memory has to identify those deep tensions and ambivalence in our political-cultural heritage and trace the ways in which ideas implicated in injustice could, upon critical reinterpretation, serve as resources for attacking it. It has to comprehend how black Americans struggling for freedom and equality were able to invoke putatively universal rights and principles and argue that they were being betrayed -- how, in Judith's Butler's formulation, they could "seize the language of the universal and set into motion a 'performative contradiction,' claiming to be covered by it and thereby exposing the contradictory character" of hegemonic formulations. [\[40\]](#)

Successive waves of immigrants have also been able to tap into that political-cultural heritage to gain a place for themselves in American society; but owing to the polarized force-field of racial relations pervading it, they did so not only by tapping into the critical potential of universalistic ideals but also by making strategic use of their dominant, exclusionary interpretations. [\[41\]](#) An inclusionary politics of memory would today have to be conceived as a multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural dialogue aiming not at unanimity but at mutual comprehension, mutual recognition, and mutual respect. Anglo-assimilationism is in its death throes; the idea of a mosaic of self-enclosed subcultures is a non-starter; what is left to us, it seems, are versions of an interactive and accommodative diversity of forms of life, with an overarching democratic political culture that leaves room for ongoing contestation, critique, and reinterpretation of its basic principles and values. [\[42\]](#) What has never been the case but must be the case, if we are ever to get beyond the racialized politics of our public sphere, is that blacks participate as equal partners in public life and public discourse. It is obvious that no one can speak for them in a public dialogue of this sort. But if they are to be included as equals, much will have to change in the massively unequal conditions of life and politics that have historically muted their voices. [\[43\]](#) So we seem to be caught again in a familiar circle.

In the final part, I want to take a brief look at one way a politics of public memory might help us to break out of it. Consistent with the focus of this essay, I shall be stressing the importance of historical enlightenment. To forestall possible misunderstandings: I am not claiming that the politics of memory exhausts the politics of race. The furthest thing from my mind is to deny the importance of social-structural factors such as the protection of group interests in the maintenance of social dominance. Nor do I harbor the slightest doubt that psychodynamic and socio-psychological factors are especially virulent in this domain. Nor, as I hope my discussions of the dialectic of past, present, and future in parts I and II make clear, do I think that the past can be separated off, either in theory or in practice, from the present and future. As I trust will become clearer in the course of part III, my selective focus here

on historical consciousness is for analytical purposes only. Whether the results repay the narrowing is for the reader to judge.

III

Politics in America has been racialized from the start; and even after the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, race remains “our nation’s most difficult subject.”^[45] On the one hand, there has been an extensive liberalization of white attitudes toward racial equality since the 1950s. The great majority of whites are now opposed *in principle* to segregation and discrimination against blacks and in favor of integration, equal opportunity, and freedom of choice in employment, schooling, housing, and the like. On the other hand, when it comes to government policies and programs meant to implement these principles, agreement breaks down. So, to begin with, we have to try to grasp the nature and sources of this discrepancy. There is substantial empirical evidence indicating that among the most important sources of disagreement on such matters is the degree of “racial resentment”: the greater the resentment whites feel toward blacks, the greater the likelihood they will be opposed to racially inflected remedial measures, and inversely for greater solidarity.^[46] Since the 1950s biological racism seems to have increasingly given way to a kind of ethical racism expressed in psychological and cultural stereotypes.^[47] The view that blacks suffer disproportionately from character defects of various sorts seems to be quite widespread among whites.^[48] And this fits with the equally widespread view that black socioeconomic disadvantages are largely the result of their possessing too little of the crucial economic-individualistic virtues -- motivation, self-discipline, hard work, and the like -- that enabled Irish, German, Italian, Jewish, and other minorities to overcome prejudice and work their ways up. On this view, too many blacks prefer to depend on government handouts rather than trying to make it on their own, thus adding to the list of missing virtues “independence” and “self-reliance.” There is, of course, a great deal of variation in opinion among whites on these matters, with a significant proportion rejecting this line of reasoning and the stereotypes on which it depends altogether. And even within the majority that accepts them, there are wide variations in the strength with which they are held and, presumably, their susceptibility to influence by evidence, argument, and experience. But there is no doubt that, overall, what George M. Frederickson called “the black image in the white mind” is still a major determinant of views on racial policies.

Two other important variables are whether discrimination is believed to be a thing of the past, and whether the history of slavery and segregation is taken to be a major cause of the inequalities African-Americans suffer under at

present. Most blacks answer no to the first and yes to the second, and in fact prominently cite these factors in justifying policies aimed at remedying racial inequalities; whereas most, though by no means all, whites do the opposite. ^[49] And that difference is consequential: the beliefs that racial discrimination has been eliminated, that “the playing field is now level,” but blacks, owing to weaknesses of character, persist in seeking handouts, and that they thereby claim and receive unfair advantages over whites, are further ingredients in the racial resentment syndrome that is the best single predictor of views on racial policies. There are other elements, some so improbable that one hesitates to mention them, but at the same time so often noted that one can’t simply ignore them. Orlando Patterson reports them as “misperceptions”: “Only 31 percent of Euro-Americans believe that Afro-Americans have less opportunity to live a middle-class life than they do, compared with 71 percent of Afro-Americans [who believe this]. Most extraordinary of all, 58 percent of Euro-Americans think that the average Afro-American is as well off or better off than Euro-Americans in their income and housing condition.” ^[50]

Even these sketchy remarks may be sufficient to locate one important contribution a politics of the memory of slavery and segregation might make to the larger politics of race in our society. Persistent racial injustices cannot be addressed by government action without significant support from whites. Opponents of such action are able to tap into, and simultaneously add to, a large reservoir of racial resentment by representing proposed policies as violations of the basic principles and values of American individualism and thus as promoting undeserved and unfair advantages for blacks at the expense of whites. In the give and take of a democratic public sphere, it is typically the case that complex issues can and will be interpreted, contextualized, framed -- or “spun” -- in different and competing ways. And there is a lot at stake in which frame predominates in public discourse, for that determines the definition of the problem, decides what is central and marginal to it, and circumscribes its justified and feasible resolutions. In the case at hand, effectively recontextualizing the racial issues of today as the latest chapter in the continuing story of slavery and its aftermath is, I want to suggest, an important means of countering attempts to tap into the reservoir of racial resentment and of diminishing that reservoir itself. The greater the public familiarity with and knowledge of that history, the greater are the chances of effectively interpreting current problems as belonging to its accumulated effects, and thus of publicly framing them as moral issues or issues of justice. ^[51]

Consider only one example: the yawning wealth gap between white and black households, usually estimated to be about 10 to 1. ^[52] I am suggesting that it could well have a significant effect on the public’s understanding of that gap to know that much of it is due to differences in the respective rates of home ownership, which is the major form of savings in the working middle class, and that *government* housing programs from the 1930s to the 1950s *overtly* and

almost totally excluded blacks from participation.^[53] Until 1948, the Federal Housing Association's *Underwriting Manual* explicitly identified blacks as unreliable and undesirable buyers. And it also included a model racial covenant, that is, a contractual clause preventing resale to blacks! Of the nearly three million housing units that received FHA insurance from 1935-1950, less than one percent -- c. 25,000 units -- was for Negro occupancy. More generally, of nine million new private dwelling units constructed in that period, less than one percent was open to purchase by nonwhite Americans. And that was a crucial period in the massive migration of blacks from country to city and South to North: "In 1940, 77 percent of black Americans still lived in the South -- 49 percent in the rural South...Between 1910 and 1970, six and a half million black Americans moved from the South to the North; five million of them moved after 1940, during the time of the mechanization of cotton farming. In 1970, when the migration ended, black America was only half Southern, and less than a quarter rural: 'urban' had become a euphemism for 'black'."^[54] A major result of government policies during this period -- in conjunction, of course, with the discriminatory practices of mortgage loan departments, real estate agencies, neighborhood "improvement" associations, among others, as well as with the massive white flight to suburbia -- was a pattern of urbanization that left black Americans the most residentially segregated minority in the country, a condition that has persisted, along with many of its causes, down to the present day.^[55] And residential segregation is, of course, a major factor in reproducing other inequalities, as it has a direct impact upon employment opportunities, the quality of education and other public services, the availability of home and business loans, and electoral power, among other things.

Understanding the black/white wealth gap in this way, as a cumulative effect of the history of racial injustice -- and one could tell similar stories about the origins of other existing inequalities -- is likely to make a difference, I am suggesting, in the judgments of many whites as to whether proposed measures are "deserved compensations" for discrimination or "unfair advantages." For a politics of memory to be politically successful, it is not necessary to convince everyone. It is surely the case that in some segments of the population, racial resentment is rooted in deep-seated prejudices that are largely impervious to rays of light from the cultural-political public sphere.^[56] But this is by no means true of all segments, particularly not of those strongly committed to the idea of racial equality. However, even the latter normally have to be convinced that any particular racial policy is in truth a fair and proportionate remedy for the effects of clear and persistent discrimination. And it is often difficult to see how that could happen without a serious upgrading of public memory to provide the necessary background for public justifications of a historical sort. From this perspective, then, there is a political need for historical enlightenment.^[57]

In the absence of widespread public familiarity with the causal background to contemporary racial problems, the political-cultural resources for resisting racist reframings of them are seriously impoverished. The thinness, spottiness, and frequent incorrectness of public historical consciousness of the story of race in America makes the cultural-political struggle to contextualize such issues historically always an uphill struggle, and often an impossibly steep one. But even if this diagnosis is correct and part of the cure lies in broadening and deepening the public memory of slavery and segregation, how could that possibly be accomplished? The answer I am proposing, in its most abstract formulation, is through a politics of memory. Even in that abstract form it has the virtue of directing attention to some underdiscussed political-cultural issues and underdeveloped cultural-political strategies. Moreover, as we can learn from our own history and from efforts to come to terms with the past in other parts of the world, there are already a plethora of tested models for filling in that formula and no obvious limits to imagining others. Given the peculiar gap between academic historical scholarship and public historical consciousness that marks our own situation, the politics of education has to be an important part of the politics of public memory in this country. ^[58] In too many areas, conservative groups with racist ideologies have been much more active and effective in local school politics than their antiracist counterparts, all the more so as the very high degree of segregation in the schools effectively excludes or diminishes the voices of blacks in predominantly white districts. Unless antiracist whites in such districts take it upon themselves to organize and struggle for curriculum reform, not much is likely to change at that level. And at the state level, the disgraceful minimization of degree requirements for high-school history teachers -- not to mention the common practice of farming out history courses to athletic coaches -- is likely to be changed only by organized political pressure for strengthening state certification requirements. Beyond school politics, there is the larger field of public education centered around museums, exhibitions, performances, historical sites, holidays, celebrations, commemorations, and other public rituals. Social actors pursuing a politics of memory could certainly make a big difference there -- for instance, by organizing a national campaign for a national museum of slavery. Broad social movements, and the voluntary associations that subtend and spring up from them, also typically generate flows of aesthetic activities that give multiform expression to their memories, perceptions, and concerns. ^[59] In the mass-mediated society that we inhabit, this dimension of cultural politics is particularly important. To be sure, black Americans have long engaged in these forms of the politics of memory, but usually without the requisite level of support among whites.

Much of this may go without saying, and I have no intention of trying to list here all the forms of cultural politics peculiar to the field on which the politics of public memory is contested. But in closing, I would like only to mention another possible vehicle of public memory: reparations claims. In my view, one of the strongest arguments in

favor of going ahead with the class-action lawsuits now being prepared is that, in present circumstances, this could prove to be the most effective means of igniting a “national conversation on race”. On the other hand, there are a number of weighty arguments against taking this path -- including the hostile reaction it is likely to elicit in broad segments of the population -- that also have to be seriously considered. But I shall not attempt that here. ^[60]

Among white Americans, the political will to deal with the catastrophic situation of the urban “underclass,” particularly the millions of “truly disadvantaged” blacks living in inner-city ghettos, is evidently too weak to resist the politics of racial resentment waged so effectively in recent decades. ^[61] To strengthen that will, it seems, we have to diminish the reservoir of racial resentment and make it more difficult to draw upon it in framing issues of racial policy. I have tried to argue that a politics of the public memory of slavery and segregation could be one way of doing so. In present circumstances, it enjoys the advantage of having academic historical scholarship on its side. It suffers the disadvantage of having our political-cultural elites largely opposed to it, or at best insufficiently interested in it. But that has been the starting points of most social movements. If enough people were to think it important enough, it could become a significant force for change. In any case, as with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Germany, it may well be the only way that the descendants of the victims will be able to breathe freely in our country.

^[1] *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is the usual German term for efforts to deal publicly with the Nazi past.

^[2] Cited in Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 106. Mills draws comparisons between the Nazi extermination of the Jews, the “American Holocaust” visited upon indigenous populations, and the “slow-motion Holocaust” of African slavery, in respect of the millions who died horrific deaths in each, the systematic nature of the violence visited upon them, and the racist ideologies that served to justify it. I shall be using “race”, without quotes, to designate concatenations of social meanings, practices, identities, institutions, and the like, that are internally connected with racial categorizations. It goes without saying that they are no less real for not corresponding to biologically fixed natures

[3] See Ruti G. Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); and Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

[4] There is another feature of German efforts to come to terms with the past that is relevant to our situation: the reparations paid to Jews since the end of the War and, more recently, to forced and slave laborers of diverse ethnic backgrounds. There has been a recent resurgence of interest here in the question of reparations for slavery and segregation; a Reparations Coordinating Committee, led by Charles Ogletree of Harvard Law School, is preparing class-action lawsuits for that purpose. But I shall have to leave the discussion of reparations to another time. This deferment should not be taken to imply that the politics of memory could in practice be disconnected from issues of redistribution. Public acknowledgement of past injustice and public responsibility for material redress are closely linked. Reparations could be one path toward the latter; in part III I shall consider certain features of a more familiar path: race-targeted government programs.

[5] See Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989) for a sketch of these shifts and a good account of the historians' debate of the 1980s. I shall be concerned here with the West German story; the East German story was quite distinct, until their separate trajectories began to merge after reunification.

[6] Many of the relevant documents, in English translation, are collected in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler*, trans. J. Knowlton & T. Cates (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), and *Reworking the Past*, ed. Peter Baldwin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

[7] In addition to the collections mentioned in the preceding note, see the helpful discussions by Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow*, and Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). A number of Habermas's contributions to the debate have appeared in English translation in a collection of his essays, *The New Conservatism*, trans. S. Weber Nichol森 (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989).

[8] The Bitburg incident involved a Kohl-staged memorial ceremony at a German military cemetery, during which then-President Reagan laid a wreath to honor the dead, among whom were a number of Waffen-SS troops. See Geoffrey Hartmann, ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986). Not long thereafter, Kohl appeared at a congress of German expelees from Silesia (in present-day Poland) and voiced his support for the German state boundaries of 1937 -- which included about 1/3 of Poland.

[9] Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). See also Habermas's speech upon the occasion of the awarding of the German Democracy Prize to Goldhagen in 1997, "On the Public Use of History," in Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation*, trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 26-37.

[10] This passage appears in an earlier (1987) article with the same English title as Habermas's address at the award ceremony for Goldhagen (see n. 8), "On the Public Use of History," in *The New Conservatism*, 229-240, at 233. It hardly needs mentioning that with the appropriate substitutions of "American" for "German" and "African-American" for "Jewish", this sentiment might be directed toward our situation as well -- but with at least three very important differences: (1) today German-Jews number in the tens of thousands, while African-Americans number in the tens of millions, so shaping an American "we" inclusive of the descendants of the previously excluded is a task of a significantly different order than forming an inclusive German "we." (2) Like most Europeans, Germans tend to think of themselves as belonging to an ethnocultural nation, whereas the American people -- at least since the decline of Anglo-Saxonism -- generally understands itself to be multiethnic and, increasingly, multicultural. (3) The USA fought a *civil* war over slavery.

[11] J. Habermas, "On the Public Use of History," *The Postnational Constellation*, 45-46.

[12] On the notion of a “subject position,” see Dominick LaCapra, “Representing the Holocaust: Reflections on the Historians Debate,” in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University press, 1992), 108-127.

[13] Carlos Thiebault elaborates this dialectic in the democratic politics of memory in an unpublished essay, “Naming Evil.”

[14] LaCapra uses this term in “Representing the Holocaust,” 111.

[15] This is a point argued by Martin Jay in “Of Plots, Witnesses, and Judgments,” in Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 97-107.

[16] This is the terminology of Martin Jay in the paper cited in the previous note.

[17] In an interesting, unpublished paper on “The Duty to Remember.” I cannot discuss here the complex question of the nature and source of such an obligation. De Greiff takes it to be a moral duty. My own inclination would be to regard it as an ethical-political “ought” with a moral-political basis. The latter is located in the normative foundations of democratic theory, that is, in the very idea of a form of political association based upon the self-governance of free and equal persons. Unpacking the dimensions of equal respect, consideration, and treatment, and elaborating their connection to the effective exercise of basic liberties, could, I think, give us a handle on the *moral-political* significance of publicly respecting the forms of life integral to individual and collective identities. But going beyond this general and abstract “ought” requires, I think, taking the particular histories and circumstances of particular polities into account. Thus the *ethical-political* question of whether the political community as a whole “ought” publicly to recognize the past sufferings of a particular group within it will depend on how “we” understand ourselves as a nation and on what kind of life “we” want for ourselves, on who “we” are and want to be. For some ideas relevant to this line of thought, see Jürgen Habermas, “Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State,” trans. S. Weber Nichol森, in Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 107-148.

[18] See Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990); and David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[19] See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chap. 3, “Consensus and Legitimation.” The remarks on historiography that follow draw heavily on Novick’s account.

[20] Novick, 76.

[21] Novick lists some of the former on 77-78, including Woodrow Wilson, who was born in Virginia in 1856 and grew to adulthood during Reconstruction.

[22] Novick, 78.

[23] One exception to this rule was an article by W.E.B. Du Bois, “Reconstruction and Its Benefits,” which appeared in the *American Historical Review* 15 (1910): 781-99.

[24] See Novick, chap. 8, “Divergence and Dissent.”

[25] S. E. Morison & H. S. Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York, 1930). Novick cites the following passage (229): “Sambo, whose wrongs moved the abolitionists to wrath and tears...suffered less than any other class in the South from its ‘peculiar institution.’... There was much to be said for slavery as a transitional status between barbarism and civilization.” On p. 350, n. 46, he reports that in the 1950s,

“Protests by Negro students and others at the City College of New York were ultimately successful in ending the use of [this text] in classes because of its racist characterizations of Negroes.”

[26] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1935); reprinted with an introduction by David Levering Lewis in 1992. In the concluding chapter of that work, “The Propaganda of History,” Du Bois provided an impassioned overview of post-Reconstruction historiography, including then current textbooks: “This chapter, therefore, which in logic should be a survey of books and sources, becomes of sheer necessity an arraignment of American historians and an indictment of their ideals.” (p. 725) The story of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction they present “may be inspiring, but it is certainly not the truth. And beyond that it is dangerous.” (p. 723)

[27] See Novick, 348-360.

[28] See David Blight, *Race and Reunion*.

[29] July 5, 1913. Cited in David Blight, “Quarrel Forgotten or a Revolution Remembered?” in *Union and Emancipation*, ed. D. Blight & B. Simpson (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1997), 175.

[30] See Desmond King, *Separate and Unequal: Black Americans and the US Federal Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[31] The phrases in quotes come from the last chapter of *Black Reconstruction in America*, 725 and 723.

[32] James Oliver Horton, “Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America’s Racial Story,” *The Public Historian* 21 (1999): 21. He refers, for instance, to the fitting out of slave ships in New England and the financing of the slave trade by New York and Pennsylvania merchants.

[33] See, for instance, David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1999); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and Desmond King, *Separate and Unequal*.

[34] This is not to deny the continuing disagreements among professional historians of race, which Novick recounts in *That Noble Dream*, 469-491; it is only to say that the white-supremacist historiography that was hegemonic from the end of Reconstruction through World War II is no longer a viable option.

[35] *Black Odyssey* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), introduction to the 1990 edition, xii.

[36] Horton, “Presenting Slavery,” 23. Jonathan Zimmerman summed up the situation in an op-ed piece for the *New York Times*, July 11, 2001: “Across the country, about 54 percent of history students in grades 7 to 12 are taught by teachers who have neither a major nor a minor in history.” (A21)

[37] The ongoing controversies about the public use of the Confederate flag are obvious indications of this. There are many others. Horton relates that when John Latschar, park superintendent at Gettysburg National Battlefield, suggested in a public lecture that the Civil War may have been fought over slavery, “the Southern Heritage Coalition condemned his words, and 1,100 postcards calling for his immediate removal flooded the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.” (26)

[38] Horton notes the numerous reports from interpreters at historical sites of negative reactions by white visitors to presentations of slavery --

even at plantation sites. (27-28) He also notes negative reactions by blacks to such presentations, which they often experience as painful and disturbing. (29-30) The wisdom of preserving the memory of slavery has long been debated among black intellectuals, by Alexander Crummell and Frederick Douglass, for instance, as by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois.

[39] Nathan Irwin Huggins, *Black Odyssey*, xliv. In using the terms “solidarity” and “community,” I am not signaling a communitarian line on political integration. Rather, I am referring broadly to the “political imaginary” that defines individuals’ and groups’ sense of belonging to a larger political community; and I am arguing that only insofar as whites and blacks imagine themselves to be *integral* parts of the *same* political community will the task of taking *collective* action on *common* goals related to the legacy of slavery be amenable to democratic resolutions.

[40] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 89. See also, Patricia J. Williams. “Alchemical Notes: Reconstructing Ideals from Deconstructed Rights,” in R. Delgado & J. Stefancic, ed., *Critical Race Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 80-90.

[41] As Dilip Gaonkar has remarked in conversation, this tension presents peculiar problems for those contemporary “model minorities” who, unlike earlier European immigrants, get racialized not as white but as “Asian-American,” thus marking another dimension of the American racial topography. The price of their higher standing in some spheres (e.g. education, employment) is their marginalization in others (e.g. politics, culture). For such minorities, understanding America’s racialized past would seem to be particularly important to comprehending and transforming their own situation. See, for instance, Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[42] See Habermas, “Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State,” and Robert Gooding-Williams, “Race, Multiculturalism, and Democracy,” *Constellations* 5 (1998): 18-41.

[43] On the nature and sources of “deliberative inequalities,” see James Bohman, *Public Deliberation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), chap. 3, and James Bohman, “Deliberative Democracy and Effective Social Freedom: Capabilities, Resources, and Opportunities,” in J. Bohman and W. Rehg, ed., *Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 321-348.

[44] Cf. notes 46, 49, and 57 below.

[45] Donald R. Kinder & Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided by Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 11. I draw on empirical material provided by Kinder and Sanders in the analysis of racial politics that follows. For a broader survey of views on the role of race in American politics, see the collection *Racialized Politics: the Debate about Racism in America*, ed. D.O. Sears, J. Sidanius, and L. Bobo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[46] “On equal opportunity in employment, school desegregation, federal assistance, affirmative action at work, and quotas in college admissions, racially resentful whites line up on one side of the issue, and racially sympathetic whites line up on the other. Racial resentment is not the *only* thing that matters, but *by a fair margin racial resentment is the most important.*” (Kinder and Sanders, 124, emphasis in original.) For an alternative view that places perceived group positions and interests at the center of the politics of race, see Lawrence Bobo, “Racial Beliefs about Affirmative Action: Assessing the Effects of Interests, Group Threat, Ideology, and Racism,” in *Racialized Politics*, 137-164. For another version of the social-structural approach that stresses the role of race in social stratification hierarchies, see Jim Sidanius & Felicia Pratto, *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Admittedly, to the extent that the politics of race is driven by the protection of group interests or the maintenance of social dominance, it would be less susceptible to amelioration by a politics of memory; beliefs in racial superiority/inferiority would be secondary factors -- ideological justifications for existing

inequalities in the distribution of material and symbolic resources -- whereas the line I pursue gives some independent force to such beliefs. It seems probable that all of these factors, and more, are at work in our racialized politics and that effective political action in this domain will have to deal with all of them. How much weight should be given to each, and in which circumstances, is not likely an issue capable of definitive empirical resolution. At any event, in the present context I am content to leave indeterminate the extent to which our racialized politics can be improved by a politics of memory, though the argument would lose its point if that extent were not considerable. My characterization of these opposing positions is indebted to Derrick Darby's discussion in "Can Rights Combat Racial Oppression?" (unpublished).

[47] Not completely, of course, as the hubbub around *The Bell Curve* by Richard J. Herrnstein & Charles Murray (New York: Free Press, 1994) indicates. Kinder and Sanders report a study in which about 75 percent of whites rejected the proposition that blacks come from a biologically inferior race, against about 10 percent who agreed with it. (326, n.60) To be sure, biological racism also typically includes psychological and cultural stereotypes; but unlike ethical racism, it takes them to be biologically rooted and thus largely unalterable.

[48] See Kinder & Sanders, chap. 5, and the survey results summed up in the table on 107.

[49] Ibid. A similar divide is reported by Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo in *Racialized Politics*, 9-16, drawing upon the extensive survey analyses of Howard Schuman et al. in *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). As I shall explain below, the view that discrimination has been largely overcome and that persistent inequalities are due not to white racism but to black culture and character figures importantly in the lower level of white support for government programs meant to address them. This means, of course, that the politics of memory, however necessary it may be to gaining enduring majority support for race-targeted reforms, is by no means sufficient. Politically contested interpretations of the present and of its relation to the past are very important factors in the politics of race, and a more complete discussion would have to take them into account; but here I address the latter only briefly and the former not at all. So I do not claim to be offering a complete picture; nor do I suppose that past and present can be kept apart either in theory or in practice. I am merely focusing analytically on the past so that I can develop the neglected dimension of public memory. I am grateful to Derrick Darby for pressing this point.

[50] *The Ordeal of Integration* (Washington, DC: Civitas, 1997), 57.

[51] The importance of preexisting cultural beliefs in enabling and constraining the definition of problems, their causes, and their solutions is stressed by social mobilization theorists who use a frame approach. See, for instance, David A. Snow & Robert D. Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant mobilization," in *International Social Movement Research 1* (1988): 197-217.

[52] See, for instance, Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[53] King, *Separate and Unequal*, chap. 6.

[54] Nicholas Lehmann, *The Promised Land* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 6.

[55] See Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[56] The social-psychological approach to racial resentment of Kinder and Sanders does in fact stress its affective as well as its cognitive side, and it does recognize the at times considerable independence of affects from beliefs. In particular, negative feelings toward blacks sometimes operate covertly in relation to stated beliefs, and sometimes even unconsciously in relation to conscious awareness of prejudice.

[57]

Robert Gooding-Williams has objected in conversation that in focusing on ignorance and false belief, my argument gives too much weight to the cognitive dimensions of racism. That is indeed my admittedly one-sided *emphasis* here -- though the politics of memory, as I understand it, does include public rites, representations, and activities of many different sorts, all of which have their emotional sides. But my choice of argumentative emphasis should not be construed as theoretically calling into question the importance either of perceived interests or of deeply entrenched prejudices and other less “cognitive” factors. I want only to argue that historical consciousness and historical enlightenment *also* have an important role to play in the politics of race.

[58] In “Race, Multiculturalism, and Democracy,” Robert Gooding-Williams stresses the importance of “race-conscious multicultural education” in fostering the capacity for democratic deliberation in a society like ours.

[59] See, for instance, the discussion of the “tools of memory making” in South Africa in *Negotiating the Past*, ed. S. Nuttall & C. Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[60] See Roy L. Brooks, ed., *When Sorry Isn't Enough. The Controversy over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice* (New York: New York University, 1999).

[61] This has led a number of theorists and activists to advocate class-based rather than race-based policies to deal with urban poverty. But public support for such policies is also affected by their racial subtext and the willingness of political opponents to exploit it. So it is difficult to see how an effective political response to urban poverty could be mounted and sustained while ignoring the operations of racial resentment. Reparations payments to fund a “Marshall Plan” for urban ghettos are increasingly mentioned as another possible line of attack.

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Vergangenheitsbewältigung^[1] in the USA

On the Politics of the Memory of Slavery

The settlement of the North American continent was ... a consequence not of any higher claim in a democratic or international sense, but rather of a consciousness of what is right which had its sole roots in the conviction of the superiority and thus of the right of the white race.

Adolf Hitler,

1932^[2]

It seems that wherever one turns these days questions of how to deal with difficult pasts have risen to the top of national and international agendas.^[3] The general premise of this paper is that the USA has not yet adequately dealt with the many forms of racial injustice endemic to its national past. And the expectation animating it is that our thinking about this failure, its consequences, and possible remedies for it can be sharpened by drawing upon the German case, particularly Germany's renewed efforts in the 1980s and 1990s to face the painful truth of the National Socialist past of the 1930s and 1940s. In that situation, the forum in which public memory was exercised and consciousness raised was a debate among historians -- a *Historikerstreit* -- that spilled over into public awareness. That peculiar circumstance allowed the links between changing public memory and changing political culture and collective identity to appear in sharp relief. One key issue in that debate concerned the role that Anti-Semitism, as a racialized mode of perception and interaction, played in the Holocaust. Others concerned the collective liability of present-day Germans for state-sanctioned and state-implemented atrocities in the past; the cultural, and political costs of suppressing painful memories and refusing to mourn; the relation of professional to popular history, and of both to public sites and rituals of commemoration; and the forms of patriotism and collective identity suitable to a democratic society with an oppressive past. In these and other respects, the German historians debate may throw some additional light on our own tortured attempts to come to terms with a past of racial injustice.^[4]

I shall focus here on only one of the major constellations of racial injustice that disfigure our past and present, the one associated with racial slavery and its aftermath. The "logics" and "dynamics" of the constellations associated

with the near extermination of Native Americans, the forceful subjection of the inhabitants of territories conquered from Mexico, the involuntary incorporation of native Hawaiians, Puerto Ricans, and Alaskan Eskimos, and the exclusion or oppression of various groups of immigrants are sufficiently different to warrant separate treatments. Moreover, it is the black/white divide that has most deeply marked the topography of American racial politics from before the Civil War to the present day. Part I will focus on the recent debates in Germany concerning the role that publicly working through the past can play in reshaping national culture and identity. Part II will use insights gleaned from that discussion to review our own failure to come to terms with a past in black and white. I will conclude, in part III, with some thoughts on how public memory might figure in debates about policies that address the legacy of slavery and segregation.

I

From the close of World War II to the present, Germany has been engaged in an ongoing effort to come to terms with its Nazi past -- in shifting circumstances and with varying aims, approaches, and results. ^[5] Immediately after the War, a defeated and divided Germany had various measures relating to its recent past imposed upon it by the victorious allies -- war crimes trials, denazification procedures, reeducation processes, and the like. From 1949 through the early 1960s, however, dealing with the past was largely -- though not completely -- suspended, as energies were marshaled in the service of *Wiederaufbau*, or rebuilding. During that period, a general turning away from the Nazi period was supported by the dominant view, in public life and in the schools, that the twelve years of National Socialism were an aberration in German history foisted upon the people by Hitler and his henchmen. Reparations were made to Israel, the "economic miracle" proceeded apace under Adenauer and Erhard, and the Nazi affiliations of major public figures were concealed behind a wall of silence. A number of German intellectuals who grew to young adulthood under National Socialism and came to maturity after the War protested this curtailment of critical investigation into the past already in the late 1950s, but with limited effect until, in the second half of the 1960s, student radicalism and the accession of the Social Democrats to power tipped the balance in favor of a determined effort to come to terms with the past. As a result, and aided by new access to Nazi documents, in the 1970s there began a steady stream of scholarly studies that left little room for doubting or denying the character and extent of Nazi crimes, the complicity of various German elites, the widespread support among large segments of the population, or the roots of Nazism in German history and culture. But in the 1980s, after the Christian Democrats returned to power under Helmut Kohl, conservative intellectuals were encouraged to take advantage of the new political climate to reclaim political-cultural dominance from the left opposition. This was the setting for the well-known *Historikerstreit*,

or historians' debate, of the mid-1980s, which I shall be considering here. ^[6]

Ernst Nolte, Michael Stürmer, Andreas Hillgruber, and other professional historians undertook to reinterpret the events of the Nazi period in ways that reduced their singularity and enormity -- for instance, by comparing the Final Solution to other mass atrocities of the twentieth century, from the massacres of the Armenians by the Turks to the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. Indeed, the Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath also served as the major explanatory factor in their account of the recent German past: Hitler and Nazism were a response to the threat of Bolshevism from the East. In addition to "normalizing" and "historicizing" the Holocaust in these ways, historical work from this quarter also promoted a shift in perspective from solidarity with the victims of Nazism to solidarity with the valiant German troops fighting on the Eastern front and with ordinary Germans suffering through the war's grim end. There was, of course, a political-cultural point to all of this: it was time for Germany to leave behind its Nazi past, turn toward the future, and assume its rightful place among the leading nations of the world. It was worse than an intellectual error to view a proud German history solely through the distorting lens of a twelve-year aberration; it was a political failing as well, for it impeded formation of the strong national identity and confident national purpose needed for effective action in rapidly changing European and global settings. By that time, most of the country's inhabitants had been born after the War or had been too young during the Nazi period to bear any individual responsibility for it. Dwelling on a past that was not theirs served no better purpose than public self-flagellation and blocked the normal development of patriotic identification with the fortunes of the nation.

With such arguments, and in concert with their political allies, the conservative historians were putting revisionist history to public use in the interests of reshaping public memory -- and thus German self-understanding -- and of relieving public conscience so as to revitalize German patriotism. And it was precisely to this political-cultural challenge that Jürgen Habermas, Hans Mommsen, and other German left-liberal intellectuals responded in the *Historikerstreit*. ^[7] I want now to consider briefly their responses concerning the public use of history, and to do so from the interested standpoint of our own difficulties in coming to terms with the past.

The overriding political-cultural issue behind the historians dispute might be put as follows: what should be the attitude of present-day Germans toward a Nazi past in which most of them were not directly implicated? Often enough the collective past is a burden on the present, and the stronger the memories of it the greater the burden. If the past in question involves terrible crimes for which amends can never really be made, the problems for collective identity and collective action can be immense. With worries of this sort in mind, many Germans felt in the mid-1980s that forty years of dealing with the Nazi past was enough and that it was time for Germany to move on -- to reestablish continuities with the many glorious aspects of its history and traditions, to foster a more positive self-understanding,

and to play a more self-confident and self-interested role in international affairs than its postwar pariah status had permitted. Those who argued against this -- successfully in the end -- noted that the process of publicly facing the past had gotten fully underway only in the late 1960s and was already throttled in the early 1980s by the *Tendenzwende*, or change of direction, set in motion when the Christian Democrats regained power under Kohl. And the character of that change -- particularly the heavy-handed attempts to reverse the political-cultural accomplishments of the 1970s and to renew German patriotism, encapsulated by the infamous events at Bitburg in 1985 -- made it clear that Germany had not yet effectively worked through its past but was rather in the process of trying to repress it. ^[8] The questionable work of the conservative historians enlisted in these efforts only proved the point: professional history was being misused to improve Germany's weak self-image by touching up the ugly picture of its recent past.

There were, of course, historiographic criticisms of that work by other historians; but the line of criticism I want to focus on stressed rather the political implications of this effort to leave the painful past behind. Jürgen Habermas, in particular, advanced the argument that German national identity was inseparable from its historical consciousness, and that any major shifts in German public memory would leave their mark upon German self-understanding, with practical-political consequences. If those shifts were in the direction of denying and repressing the past instead of confronting and dealing with it, they would likely lead to forms of "acting out" rather than "working through," symptoms of which could already be discerned in German public life, most notably in various expressions of a mounting xenophobia. For what was at issue here was not a temporary aberration but a catastrophe with deep roots in German history and culture. Historians of the Holocaust had, for instance, pointed to a virulent strain of popular anti-Semitism as a contributing factor, a diagnosis later reinforced and sharpened in Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. ^[9] Long-standing, widespread, and deeply rooted views of German racial superiority and Jewish racial inferiority had shaped a popular mindset that was, Goldhagen argued, a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the attempted Judeocide. Even those born later, who bore no individual moral guilt in that connection, had a continuing responsibility to work up, on, and through such elements of German political culture in an effort to break with the past. Failure to do so, Habermas argued, would come back to haunt German public life, for allowing the motivational force of such beliefs and attitudes to persist would only heighten the risk of repeated outbreaks of racially imbued thinking and acting, as already evinced in the growing conflicts over asylum and immigration. It would also amount to a renunciation of Germany's collective obligation to make amends for the past and a show of disrespect for its many victims.

On this point, referring to Walter Benjamin's idea of reversing the usual triumphal identification with history's

winner for an anamnestic solidarity with its victims, Habermas writes: “There is the obligation incumbent upon us in Germany...to keep alive, without distortion, and not only in an intellectual form, the memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered by German hands...If we were to brush aside this Benjaminian legacy, our fellow Jewish citizens and the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of all those who were murdered would feel themselves unable to breathe in our country.”^[10] Public remembrances and commemorations of the suffering of victims -- through artistic as well as historical representations, in public rituals and public places, in school curricula and mass media -- play crucial roles in transforming traditions and in determining what will or will not be passed on to future generations. Whether or not past evils are kept present in public consciousness, whether or not their victims are still mourned, Habermas continues, are central elements of who “we” (Germans) are and who “we” want to be. For recognizing past evil as integral to German history, as issuing “from the very midst of our collective life” -- rather than as marginal or accidental to it -- “cannot but have a powerful impact on our self-understanding...and shake any naive trust in our own traditions.”^[11] It is, in fact, an essential ingredient in any genuine effort to re-form national identity *in full awareness* of the horrors that issued from its previous formation.

The unity of this “we” is, to be sure, by no means given: it is something that has to be continually shaped and reshaped in the public sphere. For in the politics of public memory there is usually a polyphony of voices, emanating from a diversity of “subject positions”: the voices of victims and perpetrators, of resisters and collaborators, of those directly involved and those who were born later, of different regions and cultures, races and classes, political ideologies and religious convictions, and so forth.^[12] In a democratic context, this means that representations of the past may be publicly contested from perspectives that are linked to conflicting understandings of the present and orientations toward the future. And in the resultant dialectic of past, present, and future, debates over what happened and why interpenetrate with differences of interest and concern, conviction and attitude, experience and hope among the various participants.^[13] This is so in the German debates and, as we shall see, even more so in the American -- where the immense presence of the descendants of slaves in the body politic gives the idea of solidarity with the victims of history a different political edge than it has in Germany, and where Southern views of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and their aftermath managed to gain a hegemony unlike anything to be found in the defeated Germany.

Another issue in the *Historikerstreit* was the extent to which historical scholarship can and should inform the politics of memory in the public sphere by, among other things, introducing an element of objectivity into what might otherwise become simply a matter of power. To be sure, the ideas of “objectivity” in question were, for the most part,

“postdeconstructive” rather than foundationalist.^[14] It was generally agreed that narratives and interpretations are not simply dictated by facts; that their construction is always informed by the historians’ questions, interests, standpoints, temporal positions, and the like; and that there is no absolute divide between facts and interpretations, but rather a continuous spectrum. However, the latitude for reasonable disagreement is palpably different at different points in the spectrum. As one moves in the “factual” direction, the constraints imposed by the evidence -- documents, eyewitness reports, quantitative data, and so forth -- significantly narrow the range of reasonable disagreement. The critical use of such sources by the community of historical scholars results in the elimination of many proposed interpretations, as the factual claims and presuppositions germane to them are submitted to critical scrutiny -- as happened, for example, with the “Auschwitz lie” and the “Lost Cause” view of the Civil War. For though historical judgment is unavoidable, it is exercised in critical dialogue with a community of historians that can and often does achieve something approaching unanimity with regard to how the available sources bear upon the plausibility of this or that interpretation.^[15] And, as Saul Friedlander, Carlo Ginzburg, Jürgen Habermas, and others have argued concerning the historians debate over the Holocaust, if nonfoundationalist practices of objectivity and truth were not possible, there would be no lies, and might would make right, from which there could be no appeal to the evidence of historical inquiry.

The question of objectivity raises moral and ethical as well as epistemic issues; representations of the past can be faulted not only for their lies, distortions, or half-truths, but also for the unfairness they show and injustice they do to the victims of history. This can be seen, for instance, in the use, misuse, or nonuse a historian makes of the victims’ own testimonies and narratives, in how she or he “negotiates” the relationships among the competing “micronarratives” of perpetrators, victims, and onlookers, and between them and her or his own “macronarrative.”^[16] And the results of those negotiations have to be submitted to the scholarly community at large, where they will be renegotiated in the light of other judgments of fairness and ethical-political senses of solidarity. This becomes especially pressing when the descendants of victims live among “us” and experience disrespect for past suffering as a failure of solidarity in the present. As historical scholarship intersects with ethical-political debates about who “we” are and want to be as a people, about what is really in the common good and general interest, questions of doing justice to the victims of the past interpenetrate with questions of inclusion and exclusion in the present. Pablo De Greiff has put this point as follows: “we have an obligation to remember what our fellow citizens cannot be expected to forget,” in the normative sense of what we cannot reasonably expect them to forget.^[17]

What are we to make *politically* of these efforts to come to terms with the past? It is impossible to weigh their effects on West German political culture with any precision. There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that the changes have

been considerable. But how much of that is due to the external imposition of a democratic constitutional order and international pressure on its internal affairs, how much to the German “economic miracle” and widespread prosperity, how much to countless other factors not directly connected with the *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*, as Adorno called it, is difficult to say. On the other hand, we do have two strong comparative indicators of the political-cultural importance of publicly dealing with the Nazi past: Austria and East Germany. In Austria, which after the War represented itself as the passive victim of German Aggression, there was never more than superficial gestures in that direction. And the results have been clear for all to see. Though it too is democratic and prosperous, its politics is still haunted by specters of its Nazi past. At the latest, since the end of the 1980s, when Kurt Waldheim was elected President *after* it was disclosed that he had lied about his wartime past -- he had joined the German Army in 1938 and later served with units that were involved in war crimes in Yugoslavia and Greece – and *in spite of* the anti-Semitic overtones of his campaign, the return of the repressed has been unmistakable. Under Jörg Haider, the Austrian Freedom Party rapidly rose to prominence in the 1990s, regularly garnering about one-quarter of the popular vote and eventually joining in a ruling coalition with the conservative Austrian People’s Party. That it could do so on the basis of an anti-foreigner platform and accompanied by an only partly veiled anti-Semitic rhetoric elicited shocks of recognition in the rest of Europe. By contrast, West Germany’s neonationalist and xenophobic Republican Party, under Franz Schönhuber, enjoyed a comparatively brief rise at the end of the 1980s and to only a fraction of the height.

Yet closer to home, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the hasty unification of East and West Germany in 1990 provide another comparative perspective. For unlike the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic dealt only superficially with its Nazi past. The official legitimization of the postwar communist regime as the triumph and rule of antifascist forces made that unnecessary. And after unification, it was the Stalinist and post-Stalinist past that occupied public attention. But here, too, the return of the repressed was unmistakable. The anti-foreigner violence that exploded in the early 1990s and the generally xenophobic character of East German political culture made it clear that they had never worked through their Nazi past. It is, of course, true that after 1990 the process of reshaping an enlarged national identity for Germany as a whole was accompanied by various symptoms of political-cultural backsliding, including surges of neonationalism and xenophobia, and troubling appearances of anti-Semitism. But the worst of that came in the early 1990s, when the Christian Democrats exploited the conflict potential generated by the vastly altered and deeply asymmetrical political situation to put the issues of asylum, immigration, and “guest workers” at the top of the public agenda; and even then, it was much worse in the East than the West. In the West, the spontaneous popular protests against anti-foreigner violence, the rising opposition to nativist politics, and

the continuing hold on the public mind of a civic nationalism defined by the liberal and democratic principles of the Basic Law made clear how great the discontinuities with the past had become. This is not to say that Germany has fully “mastered” its Nazi past; there is ample indication that this is certainly not the case. It is only to say that the politics of memory practiced there since the 1960s has had a profound effect upon its political culture and national identity.

II

Using *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in postwar Germany to gain perspective on the politics of the memory of slavery in the USA might seem, on the face of it, to be a stretch. After all, it has been nearly a century and a half since the end of slavery, and there have already been several rounds of intense public debate concerning it, in varying political circumstances, from post-Civil-War Reconstruction to the post-World-War II Civil Rights Movement. And yet, as historians of professional and public history have made clear, the politics of memory on this subject went badly from the time that four million, mostly penniless, propertyless, jobless, and illiterate former slaves were set adrift in the post-Civil-War South. After a brief, fiercely contested period of Reconstruction ending in 1877, the price paid for reunion was the re-establishment of white supremacy in the states of the former Confederacy.^[18] As it has sometimes been put, the South lost the war but won the peace. And part of winning the peace was a reversal of the usual rule that victors in war get to write history: the professional and public history of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction were dominated by pro-Southern, anti-black perspectives until after World War II. Only since the rise of the postwar Civil rights Movement has that hegemony been overturned among professional historians; and the matter is still unresolved in public historical consciousness.

One might suppose that with the founding of the American Historical Association in 1884, racist historiography would have waned as professional historians began to replace their amateur predecessors. But prior to World War I, the “scientific” history of race in America was largely based on “scientific” -- biological, anthropological -- racism; and historiographic “impartiality” took the form of avoiding “partiality” against the antebellum South in the interest of sectional reconciliation.^[19] Especially after the generation of historians who had living memories of the War and Reconstruction was displaced by generations who didn’t, the aim of building a national community of professional historians, free of sectional conflict, motivated the negotiation of a consensual version of slavery and its aftermath. And abetted by the pervasive racism of the period -- in the North and West as well as in the South, and across the boundaries of social class and political party -- professional historians did in fact manage to achieve a high degree of historiographic agreement along racist and nationalist lines. This included a romanticized version of antebellum

plantation life with softened images of slavery, a depiction of abolitionists and Radical Republicans as extremist agitators, and an account of the outrages of Reconstruction, replete with Southern white “scalawags,” grasping Northern “carpetbaggers,” and impudent black freedmen -- that is, just the sorts of views that were disseminated to the nation at large in Thomas Dixon’s fictional *The Clansman* (1907), D. W. Griffith’s film version of it, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Claude G. Bowers popular history of Reconstruction, *The Tragic Era* (1928), and countless other widely received portrayals.

In this process of historiographic convergence, “there was considerably more give on the northern side, more take on the southern.” One reason for this was “the near unanimous racism of northern historians” in this period, fostered by the rise not only of “scientific” racism and Social Darwinism, but also of American expansionism, Anglo-Saxonism, and consciousness of the white man’s “civilizing mission.”^[20] Another was the large number of Southern historians working in the North and the virtual absence of Northern historians employed in the South.^[21] Thus there were “no southern centers of pro-northern historiography to compare with [William A.] Dunning’s Reconstruction seminar at Columbia, which attracted scores of southern students, who under Dunning’s direction turned out a stream of studies” that dominated Reconstruction historiography for decades.^[22] And Southern historians employed in the South worked under very strong constraints to hold to the received version of slavery and its aftermath. Black historians dissented, to be sure, but their work was marginalized in the profession by the white mainstream -- John Hope Franklin was the first black historian to receive a regular appointment at a white institution, in 1956 -- and was consigned to non-mainstream venues, particularly the *Journal of Negro History* founded in 1916.^[23]

In the interwar period, especially in the 1930s, this ruling consensus, while remaining dominant, came under increasingly sharp attacks from different corners of the rapidly expanding ideological spectrum -- not only from racial egalitarians, black and white, but also from Northern and Southern liberals, and from Marxists and other left intellectuals.^[24] There were a number of influences at work here -- the new antiracist anthropology which challenged scientific racism, the repellent harshness of Southern racism as epitomized in the numerous lynchings, the critical interpretive frameworks provided by left political and social thought, and the rise of a new generation of dissident historians, North and South. But despite this breakdown in consensus, no alternative synthesis appeared until after World War II. Thus, the overtly racist views of slavery propounded in the extremely influential work of Ulrich B. Phillips had no effective competitors and was still being incorporated into best-selling textbooks like that coauthored by Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steel Commager in 1930, with numerous subsequent editions.^[25] Similarly, the

dominant view of Reconstruction propounded by Dunning and his students -- who represented it as a regime of humiliation imposed on the prostrate South by vindictive radicals and valiantly resisted by the knights of the Ku Klux Klan -- came under attack but was not displaced, and entered into public consciousness through incorporation into popular fiction, film, and history. And again, the views of black historians, some of whom were now Harvard-trained professionals, were disregarded by most orthodox historians of the South -- including the views advanced by W.E.B. Du Bois in his monumental *Black Reconstruction* (1935).^[26] Despite the continuing dominance of the racist orthodoxy, however, the underlying consensus among historians gave way in the interwar years to a conflict of interpretations.

The new antiracist synthesis toward which dissident historians had begun pointing in the 1930s finally took shape and achieved dominance after World War II. The horrors perpetrated by the Nazis under the banner of racial superiority and inferiority, the decline of scientific racism and Social Darwinism, the worldwide breakup of colonial empires, the exigencies of international competition during the Cold War, and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement gave wind to the writings of younger, heterodox historians who were formed in the interwar years.^[27] Works by historians of that generation, North and South, who were committed to racial equality began to appear in the 1950s and by the close of the 1960s had completely transformed the historiography of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction.

The politics of the public memory of slavery and its aftermath gained momentum in the 1880s and 1890s, driven by many of the same forces that drove historical scholarship and in much the same direction. The memory of the Civil War was particularly contested, for the meaning conferred on this great conflict in the nation's past was perceived to be closely connected to competing visions of the nation's future. In the end, "race" lost out to "reunion."^[28] The demands of sectional reconciliation were met by figuring the War as a fight between valorous brothers, while leaving the slavery and emancipation that were its cause and outcome in the shadows. This configuration also presented fewer obstacles to the re-establishment of white supremacy in the South, which generally met with less and less resistance as racism intensified in all regions of the country and the Republicans, in order to hold on to their Northern white constituency, increasingly distanced themselves from the politics of racial equality. By the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg in 1913, the central public commemoration could be staged as a "Great Reunion" among thousands of white veterans from both armies, with scarcely a mention of the Emancipation Proclamation, whose fiftieth anniversary also fell in that year. As the *Baltimore Afro-American Ledger* summed up the situation at that time: "Today the South is in the saddle, and with the single exception of slavery, everything it fought

for during the days of the Civil War, it has gained by repression of the Negro within its borders. And the North has quietly allowed it to have its own way.”^[29]

The last line proved to be an underestimation of the situation. That same year, the newly inaugurated Woodrow Wilson, in collaboration with the newly elected, Southern-Democrat dominated House and Senate, initiated a policy of racial segregation in federal government agencies, a policy that eventually expanded, especially under the New Deal, to include most federally sponsored programs in employment, training, and housing, among others, as well as in federal prisons and, as previously, in the armed services.^[30] That is to say, from that point until the 1950s or 1960s, federal agencies were not only a prime locus of racial segregation but also enforcers of the “separate but equal” dispensation and propagators of it throughout the land. And, as W.E.B. Du Bois noted in 1935, a segregated society required a segregated historical memory: there was a “searing of the memory” in America by white supremacist historiography and a public consciousness that had “obliterated” the black experience and the meaning of emancipation.^[31]

Given the enormous shifts in the historiography of slavery and its aftermath since the 1960s, one might suppose, especially in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the same to be true of public memory. And there have, to be sure, also been important changes in the latter; but those who study popular uses of history have repeatedly noted a significant gap between academic and public historical consciousness of these matters. “Generally Americans believe that slavery was a Southern phenomenon, date it from the antebellum period, and do not think of it as central to the American story.” They are generally ignorant of the fact that “by the time of the Revolution it had become a significant economic and social institution in every one of the thirteen colonies and would remain so in every region of the new nation well into the nineteenth century.”^[32] Moreover, many think of legally institutionalized racial oppression as ending with emancipation and know rather little about racial relations in the post-Reconstruction South; and most are quite ignorant of institutionalized racism in the rest of the country -- for instance, of the roles it played in the formation of the American working class in the nineteenth century, in structuring immigration policy and citizenship law throughout our history, and in the policies and programs of the federal government in the twentieth century.^[33] With the German discussions in mind, one might be tempted to say that though our *Historikerstreit* concerning slavery and its aftermath effectively ended, at least in regard to fundamentals, in the 1960s and 1970s, the process of public *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has only just begun.^[34]

A number of different reasons are offered for the lag in public historical consciousness. To begin with, there is

a clear popular preference for history that confirms rather than confronts positive portrayals of the nation's past. Thus in public memory, what Nathan Irwin Huggins called the "master narrative" of American history remains largely unshaken: "a national history teleologically bound to the Founders' ideals rather than their reality," an "inexorable development of free institutions and the expansion of political liberty," in which racial slavery and oppression are treated as regional "aberrations -- historical accidents to be corrected in the progressive upward reach of the nation's destiny."^[35] And then there is the appalling state of history instruction in the schools: "much of the best and latest scholarship never reaches high-school students because most high-school history courses are taught by teachers with inadequate training in history...In Louisiana, 88 percent of the students who take history in high school are taught by teachers who have not even a college minor in history. In Minnesota, the proportion is 83 percent, in West Virginia 82 percent, in Oklahoma 81 percent, in Pennsylvania, 73 percent, in Kansas 72 percent." Similarly, in Maryland, Arizona, South Dakota, and Mississippi, the percentages are 70 percent or greater.^[36] Nor is this failure generally remedied at the post-secondary level: US history courses are not required, even for liberal arts degrees, in more than 4/5 of our college and universities. But the most frequently mentioned reason for the gap is the continuing volatility of race relations: talk about racial injustice in the past is typically experienced, by both blacks and whites, as being also about the present, and reacted to accordingly. This is not only the case in the South, though the heightened activism of Southern heritage groups has exacerbated the difficulties there;^[37] it holds for whites across the country, and for blacks as well.^[38] In short, relations to the passions and interests of the present are integral to the politics of the memory of racial injustice and have to be addressed as such.

Like Germany and so many other countries, we too have a past that is still present, that refuses to pass away. And it is just the haunting presence of the past that the politics of public memory seeks to address. This type of cultural politics is, of course, not new. It is practiced everyday by public historians, museum curators, artists, writers, journalists, and others in mass communication; it is a familiar element of local and national politics; and it has historically resulted in various forms of institutionalized memory. I am attempting here only to delineate more sharply and underline more emphatically its irreplaceable role in our society. Until legal, institutional, normal, everyday racism is publicly and widely understood to have been *integral* to our history and identity as a nation, we will, I am suggesting, continue to encounter major obstacles to developing the degree of transracial political solidarity required for democratic solutions to the forms of racial injustice that are it's continuing legacy. Without a developed awareness of the sources and causes of our racialized practices and attitudes, we will, I suspect, continue to find it extremely difficult even to carry on reasonable public discussions of racially inflected problems, let alone arrive at just and

feasible solutions to them. As Nathan Irwin Huggins has put it, whites and blacks are “joined at the hip,” they have a “common story” and “share the same fate”; that is, they belong to the “same community” and cannot work out their futures independently of one another. [\[39\]](#)

But ours is a community of fate that has also historically been a land of immigration, and that complicates the politics of memory considerably. The diversity of subject positions in our society is marked not only by the differences of class, age, gender, and so forth found in any society, and by black/white racial differences and North/South sectional differences. It also includes positions connected with the conquest, settlement, and expansion of America, and with the policies and practices of US immigration. What does the politics of memory mean, for instance, to the large numbers of recent immigrants whose cultural memories take them back to other worlds? I cannot even begin to sort out these immense complications here; but I do want to argue that the responsibility to come to terms with the past of slavery and segregation is borne by the political community as a whole, regardless of ancestry. This is so not only because the horrors perpetrated were generally state-sanctioned and frequently state-implemented, that is to say, were corporate evils for which there is corporate responsibility; nor only because naturalized citizens who expect to share in the inherited benefits of a continuing enterprise must also share in its inherited liabilities. It is also because immigrant groups, whatever their prior background, unavoidably become “joined at the hip” to blacks and whites, become members of the same community of fate to which all our futures are tied. The black/white polarity has fixed the geography of the color-coded world to which successive waves of immigrants have had to adapt; there is no comprehending the bizarre ethnoracial categories into which Americans have been and still are forced apart from that polarization and its effective history. This is not at all to deny that Americans of diverse origins have their own histories to relate and their own politics of memory to pursue. It is merely to point out that the history of slavery and its aftermath has formed a template for those histories, that they have been shaped by it and, and that their fates have been inextricably entangled in the racialized politics that is its legacy.

This broad and deep diversity of subject positions is sure to be reflected in the democratic politics of public memory -- in rival narratives, conflicts of interpretation, and other forms of cultural-political contestation. There is no need for unanimity here, for one substantive version of the American past to which all parties subscribe; but if there is to be public communication across differences, citizens do have to see themselves as members of the same political project, defined in large part by overlapping interpretations of constitutional rights, principles, and values. This is not a matter of returning to pure origins or foundations; there can be no reasonable doubt that our foundations were fractured from the start. But it is also not a matter of simply condemning them, or burying them forever under heaps of criticism. It was, after all, the same motley of religious and philosophical ideas that was used to justify both slavery

and abolition, both segregation and its dismantling. The politics of memory has to identify those deep tensions and ambivalence in our political-cultural heritage and trace the ways in which ideas implicated in injustice could, upon critical reinterpretation, serve as resources for attacking it. It has to comprehend how black Americans struggling for freedom and equality were able to invoke putatively universal rights and principles and argue that they were being betrayed -- how, in Judith's Butler's formulation, they could "seize the language of the universal and set into motion a 'performative contradiction,' claiming to be covered by it and thereby exposing the contradictory character" of hegemonic formulations. [\[40\]](#)

Successive waves of immigrants have also been able to tap into that political-cultural heritage to gain a place for themselves in American society; but owing to the polarized force-field of racial relations pervading it, they did so not only by tapping into the critical potential of universalistic ideals but also by making strategic use of their dominant, exclusionary interpretations. [\[41\]](#) An inclusionary politics of memory would today have to be conceived as a multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural dialogue aiming not at unanimity but at mutual comprehension, mutual recognition, and mutual respect. Anglo-assimilationism is in its death throes; the idea of a mosaic of self-enclosed subcultures is a non-starter; what is left to us, it seems, are versions of an interactive and accommodative diversity of forms of life, with an overarching democratic political culture that leaves room for ongoing contestation, critique, and reinterpretation of its basic principles and values. [\[42\]](#) What has never been the case but must be the case, if we are ever to get beyond the racialized politics of our public sphere, is that blacks participate as equal partners in public life and public discourse. It is obvious that no one can speak for them in a public dialogue of this sort. But if they are to be included as equals, much will have to change in the massively unequal conditions of life and politics that have historically muted their voices. [\[43\]](#) So we seem to be caught again in a familiar circle.

In the final part, I want to take a brief look at one way a politics of public memory might help us to break out of it. Consistent with the focus of this essay, I shall be stressing the importance of historical enlightenment. To forestall possible misunderstandings: I am not claiming that the politics of memory exhausts the politics of race. The furthest thing from my mind is to deny the importance of social-structural factors such as the protection of group interests in the maintenance of social dominance. Nor do I harbor the slightest doubt that psychodynamic and socio-psychological factors are especially virulent in this domain. Nor, as I hope my discussions of the dialectic of past, present, and future in parts I and II make clear, do I think that the past can be separated off, either in theory or in practice, from the present and future. As I trust will become clearer in the course of part III, my selective focus here

on historical consciousness is for analytical purposes only. Whether the results repay the narrowing is for the reader to judge.

III

Politics in America has been racialized from the start; and even after the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, race remains “our nation’s most difficult subject.”^[45] On the one hand, there has been an extensive liberalization of white attitudes toward racial equality since the 1950s. The great majority of whites are now opposed *in principle* to segregation and discrimination against blacks and in favor of integration, equal opportunity, and freedom of choice in employment, schooling, housing, and the like. On the other hand, when it comes to government policies and programs meant to implement these principles, agreement breaks down. So, to begin with, we have to try to grasp the nature and sources of this discrepancy. There is substantial empirical evidence indicating that among the most important sources of disagreement on such matters is the degree of “racial resentment”: the greater the resentment whites feel toward blacks, the greater the likelihood they will be opposed to racially inflected remedial measures, and inversely for greater solidarity.^[46] Since the 1950s biological racism seems to have increasingly given way to a kind of ethical racism expressed in psychological and cultural stereotypes.^[47] The view that blacks suffer disproportionately from character defects of various sorts seems to be quite widespread among whites.^[48] And this fits with the equally widespread view that black socioeconomic disadvantages are largely the result of their possessing too little of the crucial economic-individualistic virtues -- motivation, self-discipline, hard work, and the like -- that enabled Irish, German, Italian, Jewish, and other minorities to overcome prejudice and work their ways up. On this view, too many blacks prefer to depend on government handouts rather than trying to make it on their own, thus adding to the list of missing virtues “independence” and “self-reliance.” There is, of course, a great deal of variation in opinion among whites on these matters, with a significant proportion rejecting this line of reasoning and the stereotypes on which it depends altogether. And even within the majority that accepts them, there are wide variations in the strength with which they are held and, presumably, their susceptibility to influence by evidence, argument, and experience. But there is no doubt that, overall, what George M. Frederickson called “the black image in the white mind” is still a major determinant of views on racial policies.

Two other important variables are whether discrimination is believed to be a thing of the past, and whether the history of slavery and segregation is taken to be a major cause of the inequalities African-Americans suffer under at

present. Most blacks answer no to the first and yes to the second, and in fact prominently cite these factors in justifying policies aimed at remedying racial inequalities; whereas most, though by no means all, whites do the opposite. ^[49] And that difference is consequential: the beliefs that racial discrimination has been eliminated, that “the playing field is now level,” but blacks, owing to weaknesses of character, persist in seeking handouts, and that they thereby claim and receive unfair advantages over whites, are further ingredients in the racial resentment syndrome that is the best single predictor of views on racial policies. There are other elements, some so improbable that one hesitates to mention them, but at the same time so often noted that one can’t simply ignore them. Orlando Patterson reports them as “misperceptions”: “Only 31 percent of Euro-Americans believe that Afro-Americans have less opportunity to live a middle-class life than they do, compared with 71 percent of Afro-Americans [who believe this]. Most extraordinary of all, 58 percent of Euro-Americans think that the average Afro-American is as well off or better off than Euro-Americans in their income and housing condition.” ^[50]

Even these sketchy remarks may be sufficient to locate one important contribution a politics of the memory of slavery and segregation might make to the larger politics of race in our society. Persistent racial injustices cannot be addressed by government action without significant support from whites. Opponents of such action are able to tap into, and simultaneously add to, a large reservoir of racial resentment by representing proposed policies as violations of the basic principles and values of American individualism and thus as promoting undeserved and unfair advantages for blacks at the expense of whites. In the give and take of a democratic public sphere, it is typically the case that complex issues can and will be interpreted, contextualized, framed -- or “spun” -- in different and competing ways. And there is a lot at stake in which frame predominates in public discourse, for that determines the definition of the problem, decides what is central and marginal to it, and circumscribes its justified and feasible resolutions. In the case at hand, effectively recontextualizing the racial issues of today as the latest chapter in the continuing story of slavery and its aftermath is, I want to suggest, an important means of countering attempts to tap into the reservoir of racial resentment and of diminishing that reservoir itself. The greater the public familiarity with and knowledge of that history, the greater are the chances of effectively interpreting current problems as belonging to its accumulated effects, and thus of publicly framing them as moral issues or issues of justice. ^[51]

Consider only one example: the yawning wealth gap between white and black households, usually estimated to be about 10 to 1. ^[52] I am suggesting that it could well have a significant effect on the public’s understanding of that gap to know that much of it is due to differences in the respective rates of home ownership, which is the major form of savings in the working middle class, and that *government* housing programs from the 1930s to the 1950s *overtly* and

almost totally excluded blacks from participation.^[53] Until 1948, the Federal Housing Association's *Underwriting Manual* explicitly identified blacks as unreliable and undesirable buyers. And it also included a model racial covenant, that is, a contractual clause preventing resale to blacks! Of the nearly three million housing units that received FHA insurance from 1935-1950, less than one percent -- c. 25,000 units -- was for Negro occupancy. More generally, of nine million new private dwelling units constructed in that period, less than one percent was open to purchase by nonwhite Americans. And that was a crucial period in the massive migration of blacks from country to city and South to North: "In 1940, 77 percent of black Americans still lived in the South -- 49 percent in the rural South...Between 1910 and 1970, six and a half million black Americans moved from the South to the North; five million of them moved after 1940, during the time of the mechanization of cotton farming. In 1970, when the migration ended, black America was only half Southern, and less than a quarter rural: 'urban' had become a euphemism for 'black'."^[54] A major result of government policies during this period -- in conjunction, of course, with the discriminatory practices of mortgage loan departments, real estate agencies, neighborhood "improvement" associations, among others, as well as with the massive white flight to suburbia -- was a pattern of urbanization that left black Americans the most residentially segregated minority in the country, a condition that has persisted, along with many of its causes, down to the present day.^[55] And residential segregation is, of course, a major factor in reproducing other inequalities, as it has a direct impact upon employment opportunities, the quality of education and other public services, the availability of home and business loans, and electoral power, among other things.

Understanding the black/white wealth gap in this way, as a cumulative effect of the history of racial injustice -- and one could tell similar stories about the origins of other existing inequalities -- is likely to make a difference, I am suggesting, in the judgments of many whites as to whether proposed measures are "deserved compensations" for discrimination or "unfair advantages." For a politics of memory to be politically successful, it is not necessary to convince everyone. It is surely the case that in some segments of the population, racial resentment is rooted in deep-seated prejudices that are largely impervious to rays of light from the cultural-political public sphere.^[56] But this is by no means true of all segments, particularly not of those strongly committed to the idea of racial equality. However, even the latter normally have to be convinced that any particular racial policy is in truth a fair and proportionate remedy for the effects of clear and persistent discrimination. And it is often difficult to see how that could happen without a serious upgrading of public memory to provide the necessary background for public justifications of a historical sort. From this perspective, then, there is a political need for historical enlightenment.^[57]

In the absence of widespread public familiarity with the causal background to contemporary racial problems, the political-cultural resources for resisting racist reframings of them are seriously impoverished. The thinness, spottiness, and frequent incorrectness of public historical consciousness of the story of race in America makes the cultural-political struggle to contextualize such issues historically always an uphill struggle, and often an impossibly steep one. But even if this diagnosis is correct and part of the cure lies in broadening and deepening the public memory of slavery and segregation, how could that possibly be accomplished? The answer I am proposing, in its most abstract formulation, is through a politics of memory. Even in that abstract form it has the virtue of directing attention to some underdiscussed political-cultural issues and underdeveloped cultural-political strategies. Moreover, as we can learn from our own history and from efforts to come to terms with the past in other parts of the world, there are already a plethora of tested models for filling in that formula and no obvious limits to imagining others. Given the peculiar gap between academic historical scholarship and public historical consciousness that marks our own situation, the politics of education has to be an important part of the politics of public memory in this country. ^[58] In too many areas, conservative groups with racist ideologies have been much more active and effective in local school politics than their antiracist counterparts, all the more so as the very high degree of segregation in the schools effectively excludes or diminishes the voices of blacks in predominantly white districts. Unless antiracist whites in such districts take it upon themselves to organize and struggle for curriculum reform, not much is likely to change at that level. And at the state level, the disgraceful minimization of degree requirements for high-school history teachers -- not to mention the common practice of farming out history courses to athletic coaches -- is likely to be changed only by organized political pressure for strengthening state certification requirements. Beyond school politics, there is the larger field of public education centered around museums, exhibitions, performances, historical sites, holidays, celebrations, commemorations, and other public rituals. Social actors pursuing a politics of memory could certainly make a big difference there -- for instance, by organizing a national campaign for a national museum of slavery. Broad social movements, and the voluntary associations that subtend and spring up from them, also typically generate flows of aesthetic activities that give multiform expression to their memories, perceptions, and concerns. ^[59] In the mass-mediated society that we inhabit, this dimension of cultural politics is particularly important. To be sure, black Americans have long engaged in these forms of the politics of memory, but usually without the requisite level of support among whites.

Much of this may go without saying, and I have no intention of trying to list here all the forms of cultural politics peculiar to the field on which the politics of public memory is contested. But in closing, I would like only to mention another possible vehicle of public memory: reparations claims. In my view, one of the strongest arguments in

favor of going ahead with the class-action lawsuits now being prepared is that, in present circumstances, this could prove to be the most effective means of igniting a “national conversation on race”. On the other hand, there are a number of weighty arguments against taking this path -- including the hostile reaction it is likely to elicit in broad segments of the population -- that also have to be seriously considered. But I shall not attempt that here. [\[60\]](#)

Among white Americans, the political will to deal with the catastrophic situation of the urban “underclass,” particularly the millions of “truly disadvantaged” blacks living in inner-city ghettos, is evidently too weak to resist the politics of racial resentment waged so effectively in recent decades. [\[61\]](#) To strengthen that will, it seems, we have to diminish the reservoir of racial resentment and make it more difficult to draw upon it in framing issues of racial policy. I have tried to argue that a politics of the public memory of slavery and segregation could be one way of doing so. In present circumstances, it enjoys the advantage of having academic historical scholarship on its side. It suffers the disadvantage of having our political-cultural elites largely opposed to it, or at best insufficiently interested in it. But that has been the starting points of most social movements. If enough people were to think it important enough, it could become a significant force for change. In any case, as with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Germany, it may well be the only way that the descendants of the victims will be able to breathe freely in our country.

[\[1\]](#) *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is the usual German term for efforts to deal publicly with the Nazi past.

[\[2\]](#) Cited in Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 106. Mills draws comparisons between the Nazi extermination of the Jews, the “American Holocaust” visited upon indigenous populations, and the “slow-motion Holocaust” of African slavery, in respect of the millions who died horrific deaths in each, the systematic nature of the violence visited upon them, and the racist ideologies that served to justify it. I shall be using “race”, without quotes, to designate concatenations of social meanings, practices, identities, institutions, and the like, that are internally connected with racial categorizations. It goes without saying that they are no less real for not corresponding to biologically fixed natures

[3] See Ruti G. Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); and Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

[4] There is another feature of German efforts to come to terms with the past that is relevant to our situation: the reparations paid to Jews since the end of the War and, more recently, to forced and slave laborers of diverse ethnic backgrounds. There has been a recent resurgence of interest here in the question of reparations for slavery and segregation; a Reparations Coordinating Committee, led by Charles Ogletree of Harvard Law School, is preparing class-action lawsuits for that purpose. But I shall have to leave the discussion of reparations to another time. This deferment should not be taken to imply that the politics of memory could in practice be disconnected from issues of redistribution. Public acknowledgement of past injustice and public responsibility for material redress are closely linked. Reparations could be one path toward the latter; in part III I shall consider certain features of a more familiar path: race-targeted government programs.

[5] See Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989) for a sketch of these shifts and a good account of the historians' debate of the 1980s. I shall be concerned here with the West German story; the East German story was quite distinct, until their separate trajectories began to merge after reunification.

[6] Many of the relevant documents, in English translation, are collected in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler*, trans. J. Knowlton & T. Cates (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), and *Reworking the Past*, ed. Peter Baldwin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

[7] In addition to the collections mentioned in the preceding note, see the helpful discussions by Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow*, and Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). A number of Habermas's contributions to the debate have appeared in English translation in a collection of his essays, *The New Conservatism*, trans. S. Weber Nichol森 (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989).

[8] The Bitburg incident involved a Kohl-staged memorial ceremony at a German military cemetery, during which then-President Reagan laid a wreath to honor the dead, among whom were a number of Waffen-SS troops. See Geoffrey Hartmann, ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986). Not long thereafter, Kohl appeared at a congress of German expelees from Silesia (in present-day Poland) and voiced his support for the German state boundaries of 1937 -- which included about 1/3 of Poland.

[9] Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). See also Habermas's speech upon the occasion of the awarding of the German Democracy Prize to Goldhagen in 1997, "On the Public Use of History," in Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation*, trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 26-37.

[10] This passage appears in an earlier (1987) article with the same English title as Habermas's address at the award ceremony for Goldhagen (see n. 8), "On the Public Use of History," in *The New Conservatism*, 229-240, at 233. It hardly needs mentioning that with the appropriate substitutions of "American" for "German" and "African-American" for "Jewish", this sentiment might be directed toward our situation as well -- but with at least three very important differences: (1) today German-Jews number in the tens of thousands, while African-Americans number in the tens of millions, so shaping an American "we" inclusive of the descendants of the previously excluded is a task of a significantly different order than forming an inclusive German "we." (2) Like most Europeans, Germans tend to think of themselves as belonging to an ethnocultural nation, whereas the American people -- at least since the decline of Anglo-Saxonism -- generally understands itself to be multiethnic and, increasingly, multicultural. (3) The USA fought a *civil* war over slavery.

[11] J. Habermas, "On the Public Use of History," *The Postnational Constellation*, 45-46.

[12] On the notion of a “subject position,” see Dominick LaCapra, “Representing the Holocaust: Reflections on the Historians Debate,” in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University press, 1992), 108-127.

[13] Carlos Thiebault elaborates this dialectic in the democratic politics of memory in an unpublished essay, “Naming Evil.”

[14] LaCapra uses this term in “Representing the Holocaust,” 111.

[15] This is a point argued by Martin Jay in “Of Plots, Witnesses, and Judgments,” in Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 97-107.

[16] This is the terminology of Martin Jay in the paper cited in the previous note.

[17] In an interesting, unpublished paper on “The Duty to Remember.” I cannot discuss here the complex question of the nature and source of such an obligation. De Greiff takes it to be a moral duty. My own inclination would be to regard it as an ethical-political “ought” with a moral-political basis. The latter is located in the normative foundations of democratic theory, that is, in the very idea of a form of political association based upon the self-governance of free and equal persons. Unpacking the dimensions of equal respect, consideration, and treatment, and elaborating their connection to the effective exercise of basic liberties, could, I think, give us a handle on the *moral-political* significance of publicly respecting the forms of life integral to individual and collective identities. But going beyond this general and abstract “ought” requires, I think, taking the particular histories and circumstances of particular polities into account. Thus the *ethical-political* question of whether the political community as a whole “ought” publicly to recognize the past sufferings of a particular group within it will depend on how “we” understand ourselves as a nation and on what kind of life “we” want for ourselves, on who “we” are and want to be. For some ideas relevant to this line of thought, see Jürgen Habermas, “Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State,” trans. S. Weber Nichol森, in Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 107-148.

[18] See Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990); and David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[19] See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chap. 3, “Consensus and Legitimation.” The remarks on historiography that follow draw heavily on Novick’s account.

[20] Novick, 76.

[21] Novick lists some of the former on 77-78, including Woodrow Wilson, who was born in Virginia in 1856 and grew to adulthood during Reconstruction.

[22] Novick, 78.

[23] One exception to this rule was an article by W.E.B. Du Bois, “Reconstruction and Its Benefits,” which appeared in the *American Historical Review* 15 (1910): 781-99.

[24] See Novick, chap. 8, “Divergence and Dissent.”

[25] S. E. Morison & H. S. Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York, 1930). Novick cites the following passage (229): “Sambo, whose wrongs moved the abolitionists to wrath and tears...suffered less than any other class in the South from its ‘peculiar institution.’... There was much to be said for slavery as a transitional status between barbarism and civilization.” On p. 350, n. 46, he reports that in the 1950s,

“Protests by Negro students and others at the City College of New York were ultimately successful in ending the use of [this text] in classes because of its racist characterizations of Negroes.”

[26] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1935); reprinted with an introduction by David Levering Lewis in 1992. In the concluding chapter of that work, “The Propaganda of History,” Du Bois provided an impassioned overview of post-Reconstruction historiography, including then current textbooks: “This chapter, therefore, which in logic should be a survey of books and sources, becomes of sheer necessity an arraignment of American historians and an indictment of their ideals.” (p. 725) The story of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction they present “may be inspiring, but it is certainly not the truth. And beyond that it is dangerous.” (p. 723)

[27] See Novick, 348-360.

[28] See David Blight, *Race and Reunion*.

[29] July 5, 1913. Cited in David Blight, “Quarrel Forgotten or a Revolution Remembered?” in *Union and Emancipation*, ed. D. Blight & B. Simpson (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1997), 175.

[30] See Desmond King, *Separate and Unequal: Black Americans and the US Federal Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[31] The phrases in quotes come from the last chapter of *Black Reconstruction in America*, 725 and 723.

[32] James Oliver Horton, “Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America’s Racial Story,” *The Public Historian* 21 (1999): 21. He refers, for instance, to the fitting out of slave ships in New England and the financing of the slave trade by New York and Pennsylvania merchants.

[33] See, for instance, David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1999); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and Desmond King, *Separate and Unequal*.

[34] This is not to deny the continuing disagreements among professional historians of race, which Novick recounts in *That Noble Dream*, 469-491; it is only to say that the white-supremacist historiography that was hegemonic from the end of Reconstruction through World War II is no longer a viable option.

[35] *Black Odyssey* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), introduction to the 1990 edition, xii.

[36] Horton, “Presenting Slavery,” 23. Jonathan Zimmerman summed up the situation in an op-ed piece for the *New York Times*, July 11, 2001: “Across the country, about 54 percent of history students in grades 7 to 12 are taught by teachers who have neither a major nor a minor in history.” (A21)

[37] The ongoing controversies about the public use of the Confederate flag are obvious indications of this. There are many others. Horton relates that when John Latschar, park superintendent at Gettysburg National Battlefield, suggested in a public lecture that the Civil War may have been fought over slavery, “the Southern Heritage Coalition condemned his words, and 1,100 postcards calling for his immediate removal flooded the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.” (26)

[38] Horton notes the numerous reports from interpreters at historical sites of negative reactions by white visitors to presentations of slavery --

even at plantation sites. (27-28) He also notes negative reactions by blacks to such presentations, which they often experience as painful and disturbing. (29-30) The wisdom of preserving the memory of slavery has long been debated among black intellectuals, by Alexander Crummell and Frederick Douglass, for instance, as by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois.

[39] Nathan Irwin Huggins, *Black Odyssey*, xliv. In using the terms “solidarity” and “community,” I am not signaling a communitarian line on political integration. Rather, I am referring broadly to the “political imaginary” that defines individuals’ and groups’ sense of belonging to a larger political community; and I am arguing that only insofar as whites and blacks imagine themselves to be *integral* parts of the *same* political community will the task of taking *collective* action on *common* goals related to the legacy of slavery be amenable to democratic resolutions.

[40] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 89. See also, Patricia J. Williams. “Alchemical Notes: Reconstructing Ideals from Deconstructed Rights,” in R. Delgado & J. Stefancic, ed., *Critical Race Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 80-90.

[41] As Dilip Gaonkar has remarked in conversation, this tension presents peculiar problems for those contemporary “model minorities” who, unlike earlier European immigrants, get racialized not as white but as “Asian-American,” thus marking another dimension of the American racial topography. The price of their higher standing in some spheres (e.g. education, employment) is their marginalization in others (e.g. politics, culture). For such minorities, understanding America’s racialized past would seem to be particularly important to comprehending and transforming their own situation. See, for instance, Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[42] See Habermas, “Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State,” and Robert Gooding-Williams, “Race, Multiculturalism, and Democracy,” *Constellations* 5 (1998): 18-41.

[43] On the nature and sources of “deliberative inequalities,” see James Bohman, *Public Deliberation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), chap. 3, and James Bohman, “Deliberative Democracy and Effective Social Freedom: Capabilities, Resources, and Opportunities,” in J. Bohman and W. Rehg, ed., *Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 321-348.

[44] Cf. notes 46, 49, and 57 below.

[45] Donald R. Kinder & Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided by Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 11. I draw on empirical material provided by Kinder and Sanders in the analysis of racial politics that follows. For a broader survey of views on the role of race in American politics, see the collection *Racialized Politics: the Debate about Racism in America*, ed. D.O. Sears, J. Sidanius, and L. Bobo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[46] “On equal opportunity in employment, school desegregation, federal assistance, affirmative action at work, and quotas in college admissions, racially resentful whites line up on one side of the issue, and racially sympathetic whites line up on the other. Racial resentment is not the *only* thing that matters, but *by a fair margin racial resentment is the most important.*” (Kinder and Sanders, 124, emphasis in original.) For an alternative view that places perceived group positions and interests at the center of the politics of race, see Lawrence Bobo, “Racial Beliefs about Affirmative Action: Assessing the Effects of Interests, Group Threat, Ideology, and Racism,” in *Racialized Politics*, 137-164. For another version of the social-structural approach that stresses the role of race in social stratification hierarchies, see Jim Sidanius & Felicia Pratto, *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Admittedly, to the extent that the politics of race is driven by the protection of group interests or the maintenance of social dominance, it would be less susceptible to amelioration by a politics of memory; beliefs in racial superiority/inferiority would be secondary factors -- ideological justifications for existing

inequalities in the distribution of material and symbolic resources -- whereas the line I pursue gives some independent force to such beliefs. It seems probable that all of these factors, and more, are at work in our racialized politics and that effective political action in this domain will have to deal with all of them. How much weight should be given to each, and in which circumstances, is not likely an issue capable of definitive empirical resolution. At any event, in the present context I am content to leave indeterminate the extent to which our racialized politics can be improved by a politics of memory, though the argument would lose its point if that extent were not considerable. My characterization of these opposing positions is indebted to Derrick Darby's discussion in "Can Rights Combat Racial Oppression?" (unpublished).

[47] Not completely, of course, as the hubbub around *The Bell Curve* by Richard J. Herrnstein & Charles Murray (New York: Free Press, 1994) indicates. Kinder and Sanders report a study in which about 75 percent of whites rejected the proposition that blacks come from a biologically inferior race, against about 10 percent who agreed with it. (326, n.60) To be sure, biological racism also typically includes psychological and cultural stereotypes; but unlike ethical racism, it takes them to be biologically rooted and thus largely unalterable.

[48] See Kinder & Sanders, chap. 5, and the survey results summed up in the table on 107.

[49] Ibid. A similar divide is reported by Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo in *Racialized Politics*, 9-16, drawing upon the extensive survey analyses of Howard Schuman et al. in *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). As I shall explain below, the view that discrimination has been largely overcome and that persistent inequalities are due not to white racism but to black culture and character figures importantly in the lower level of white support for government programs meant to address them. This means, of course, that the politics of memory, however necessary it may be to gaining enduring majority support for race-targeted reforms, is by no means sufficient. Politically contested interpretations of the present and of its relation to the past are very important factors in the politics of race, and a more complete discussion would have to take them into account; but here I address the latter only briefly and the former not at all. So I do not claim to be offering a complete picture; nor do I suppose that past and present can be kept apart either in theory or in practice. I am merely focusing analytically on the past so that I can develop the neglected dimension of public memory. I am grateful to Derrick Darby for pressing this point.

[50] *The Ordeal of Integration* (Washington, DC: Civitas, 1997), 57.

[51] The importance of preexisting cultural beliefs in enabling and constraining the definition of problems, their causes, and their solutions is stressed by social mobilization theorists who use a frame approach. See, for instance, David A. Snow & Robert D. Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant mobilization," in *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988): 197-217.

[52] See, for instance, Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[53] King, *Separate and Unequal*, chap. 6.

[54] Nicholas Lehmann, *The Promised Land* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 6.

[55] See Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[56] The social-psychological approach to racial resentment of Kinder and Sanders does in fact stress its affective as well as its cognitive side, and it does recognize the at times considerable independence of affects from beliefs. In particular, negative feelings toward blacks sometimes operate covertly in relation to stated beliefs, and sometimes even unconsciously in relation to conscious awareness of prejudice.

[57]

Robert Gooding-Williams has objected in conversation that in focusing on ignorance and false belief, my argument gives too much weight to the cognitive dimensions of racism. That is indeed my admittedly one-sided *emphasis* here -- though the politics of memory, as I understand it, does include public rites, representations, and activities of many different sorts, all of which have their emotional sides. But my choice of argumentative emphasis should not be construed as theoretically calling into question the importance either of perceived interests or of deeply entrenched prejudices and other less “cognitive” factors. I want only to argue that historical consciousness and historical enlightenment *also* have an important role to play in the politics of race.

[58] In “Race, Multiculturalism, and Democracy,” Robert Gooding-Williams stresses the importance of “race-conscious multicultural education” in fostering the capacity for democratic deliberation in a society like ours.

[59] See, for instance, the discussion of the “tools of memory making” in South Africa in *Negotiating the Past*, ed. S. Nuttall & C. Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[60] See Roy L. Brooks, ed., *When Sorry Isn't Enough. The Controversy over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice* (New York: New York University, 1999).

[61] This has led a number of theorists and activists to advocate class-based rather than race-based policies to deal with urban poverty. But public support for such policies is also affected by their racial subtext and the willingness of political opponents to exploit it. So it is difficult to see how an effective political response to urban poverty could be mounted and sustained while ignoring the operations of racial resentment. Reparations payments to fund a “Marshall Plan” for urban ghettos are increasingly mentioned as another possible line of attack.

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