

Critics' Forum

Literature

An Archive in a Footnote: The Legacy Project

By Hovig Tchalian

Now that the tumult of events surrounding Genocide commemoration has subsided, it is worth taking pause and considering the aftermath. The inevitable moment after (especially once the celebrations of May 28th are also past) brings up the difficult but enduring question—"What now?" or, more skeptically, "Is this all there is?"

An ambitious project, sponsored by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research and The Rockefeller Foundation, offers perhaps the most satisfying and propitious answer – allowing the act of remembrance to outlive the moment of its inception. The Project consists primarily of a website (www.legacy-project.org) that, as the site's own description puts it, "will build a global exchange on the enduring consequences of the many historical tragedies of the 20th century."

In essence, the site archives the various reactions to the historical tragedies of the previous century, in the hope of preventing their future occurrence, or at least dampening their detrimental effects on society. The website's "events index" provides a comprehensive alphabetical list of the nearly 25 "events" included in the archive—from "African Conflicts," Apartheid, the Armenian Genocide and the "Cambodian Killing Fields," through the Holocaust and the struggles of "indigenous peoples," to the two World Wars.

Admittedly, the strand tying all these "events" together – the issue of social injustice, broadly conceived – is somewhat tenuous. And the categorization scheme may be suspect. (What about "indigenous peoples" constitutes a set of "events"?) Perhaps a better way of linking these various themes together is under the even broader theme of remembrance, the complex "legacy" that gives the project its name. According to the website, "the Legacy Project offers a channel for mutual recognition across generations and geography. Through scholarly research and innovative presentation, The Legacy Project will create new – and shared – frameworks for cultural expressions of loss, drawn from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe. Our work will help define the language of human loss – its forms, its symbols, its grammar. . . . The Legacy Project seeks a collective, retrospective reflection on the losses that constitute the legacy of the last century."

The real value of the project – the genuine goal of active remembrance and comparative historical study facilitated by the creation of a central archive of various human injustices – is overshadowed by the quite ambitious but nonetheless diffuse goal of defining "the language of human loss," a goal arguably more akin to academic studies than to historical reality. The site nonetheless admirably achieves its more modest goal of preserving the poems, plays, speeches, films, historical commentary, and a host of other reactions to the tragedies that have defined our century and the prior one.

Unlike the more strictly historical mission of, say, the Zoryan Institute, which carries out the important work of preserving the commentaries of Genocide survivors and legal and historical documents related to the event itself, the Legacy Project preserves the reactions of the generations that succeeded them. By doing so, it carries out the equally important work of archiving in one place what would otherwise constitute a scattered series of footnotes, the “secondary” memory of the historical events that record the shock registered in the minds and hearts of more than a century’s worth of indirect witnesses. In this sense, the website performs the much-needed function of commemorating the act of commemoration itself – testimony to the enduring will of those who would see the tragedies halted and continual fodder for all of us looking for a viable answer to the question with which we began, “What now?”

The selections included on the site are nothing short of remarkable. As of the last viewing, the website includes virtual exhibitions of “Frank Stella, the Polish Village Series;” “The “Art of Afterwards;” and a study of “Echoes of the Guernica.” There is also a “Virtual Symposium” of Holocaust-related issues, as well as the discussions of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. The site also includes a searchable database of the various literary, artistic and film materials included on the site. Excerpts of the work of Armenian poet and writer Peter Balakian are represented, as are the enigmatic and powerful historico-philosophical ruminations of the German-Jewish cultural critic, Walter Benjamin.

Despite the Legacy Project’s sophistication and the breadth and depth of its archives, there are nonetheless some glaring omissions in its website content. A search for Atom Egoyan or his film, “Ararat,” for instance, will return no results. And there is a noticeable dearth of items about the Genocide more generally. Luckily, the remedy is readily available. The website provides the following email address for feedback and suggestions: legacy@legacy-project.org. What better way to make one’s voice heard while helping transform the footnotes of the Genocide and other historical tragedies into a growing archive that will survive the few weeks of their commemoration?

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