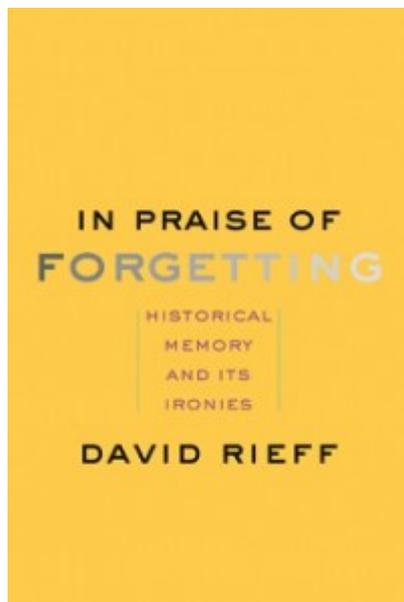


# David Rieff's In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies



In *At The Mind's Limits*, a series of essays reflecting on his time spent in the Nazi concentration camps, Jean Améry predicted that in one hundred years the murder of millions, carried out by “a highly civilized people,” will be lumped with countless other 20<sup>th</sup> century horrors and submerged in a general “Century of Barbarism.” Victims like Améry “will appear as the truly incorrigible, irreconcilable ones, as the anti-historical reactionaries in the exact sense of the word.” And history will be, perversely, the prime agent of this (and his) erasure.

Améry was not wrong. As David Rieff points out in his illuminating study, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies*, by 2045 the last survivors of Nazi atrocities will be dead. Whatever moral or intellectual satisfaction Améry might have obtained from remembrance of his atrocity will pass on to people who were not victims, people who, no matter how well-intentioned, manipulate Améry's memories and experiences to their own social, political and cultural ends

(like me, right now). “The verb to remember,” Rieff argues, “simply cannot be conjugated in the plural except when in reference to those who lived through what they communicate.”

Despite this, the collective memory industry is booming. From Washington DC to Saudi Arabia groups of concerned citizens and respectable thinkers recreate the past in their own image, projecting grievances and “the memory of wounds” into the future out of a mistaken belief in memory’s ability to prevent future crimes (take, for example, the ongoing 1916 Irish [centenary](#) or Russia’s 70<sup>th</sup> Victory Day anniversary military [chest-thumping](#)). Relying heavily on “highly questionable notions of collective consciousness,” Rieff contends, these groups have turned memory into a “moral and social imperative,” an imperative that has become one of the “more unassailable pieties of our age.” Rieff finds this notion justifiably—and demonstrably—absurd.

And yet, even if he is right, very few would find it anything less than irresponsible to contemplate the obvious, if terrifying, alternative—forgetting. Rieff just does that. Rieff’s *In Praise of Forgetting* covers a remarkable amount of ground in less than 150 pages—from Australia’s Anzac Day ceremonies and First World War Gallipoli campaign to W.B. Yeats and Ireland’s Troubles to the 9/11 Memorial and Al Qaeda—while glossing an even more remarkable number of scholars and poets for evidence of the ways in which memory is used and abused. Is it time, he wonders, that we dispense with Santayana’s famous adage about remembering the past for Nietzsche’s “active forgetting”?

Important to this counterintuitive argument is Rieff’s notion of progress. Very much like the English philosopher John Gray—who appears often in *In Praise of Forgetting*—Rieff does not really believe in progress, at least not in the traditional sense. Where many governments today consciously and unconsciously assume teleological and Whiggish

constructions of the historical record—that we are the culmination of history rather than its contingent byproduct—Rieff’s understanding of history is less palatable perhaps but infinitely more pragmatic and productive. In this version, when progress is made, it comes through ugly compromise, what John Gray describes as a “modus vivendi among civilizations,” necessary in a world where particular cultural values are, unfortunately, incommensurable.

According to Rieff, nothing impedes this type of progress more than paeans to collective memories that cannot logically exist, and which idealize a perfect rationality that humans clearly do not possess. Rieff adroitly interrogates the overreaching claims of historians like Avishai Marglit who call for some kind “of shared moral memory for humankind” to combat the “biased silences” in the historical record. Rieff compares such thinking to that of those who in the human rights communities “insist that there can be no lasting peace without justice.” Not true. History, Rieff asserts, “is replete with outcomes that provided the first while denying the second.” To Rieff, the memory community could stand to grow up a little in this respect—giving up on utopian dreams of perfectly remembered pasts for the rough and tumble politics of strategic forgetting.

But the target of Rieff’s argument is less professional historians like Marglit, who often qualify their arguments, acknowledging the dangers of memory obsessions (e.g., [Confederate memorials](#) or Bin Laden’s “[crusader armies](#)”), and more the memory industry, whose uncritical interpretations have turned experiences like Améry’s into self-validating tourist kitsch and perpetuated violence in places like Ireland for seventy years. Rieff’s book takes for granted what academics have long been wary of acknowledging—that the majority of human beings have little use for the subtleties of critical history. What they do have use for is the banalities of historical platitudes and the mysticisms of collective

memory. Cases in point: Joan of Arc's current [incarnation](#) as the enemy of immigrants in France, [Mel Gibson](#) as Scotland's national hero and any promise to make "[America Great Again](#)."

Memory for memory's sake should not be laughed at (at least not always). Rieff witnessed firsthand in the Balkans how each side used often-valid historical grievances to justify the continuation of violence. My own time working with Iraqis from 2006 to 2007 in Mosul taught me something similar. And in an U.S. election cycle dominated by grievance, it is perhaps time we start taking forgetting seriously, and not simply its consequences but also its inevitability and practicability. The alternative, the continued privileging of memory, of starry-eyed assumptions about the redemptive possibilities and inherent morality of remembrance, carries with it its own dangers, dangers we would be foolish to dismiss as third-world barbarisms.

Of course, such talk of forgetting will have its critics. Anyone who has studied race in America well knows how silence and amnesia can perpetuate violence too. And movies like the sublime *Son of Saul* prove that there are ways to remember the Shoah and other atrocities that don't descend into kitsch. Yet, after watching *Son of Saul* on my computer, advertisements proliferated in my web browser. They all asked the same thing: that this Passover, I think about investing in Israel Bonds. This surprised me. After reading Rieff's *In Praise of Forgetting*, it shouldn't have. Memory is not sacred. It is not above the present. It is not above the politics of the now. Whatever your thoughts on forgetting, it would be criminal to exchange one self-satisfied piety for another—to forget that the victims of history can be and often are persecuted by those who consider themselves the most competent and thorough of historians.

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# Reinhold Messner as Nietzschean Übermensch

One month ago, on July 24, 2015, the sixth and final Messner Mountain Museum opened to the public on the top of a mountain in northern Italy, a couple hours from where I live. This newest museum is a futuristic design by an Iraqi architect, and is the brainchild and property of famed mountaineer Reinhold Messner, who comes from the Italian region of Alto-Adige. In this post I will give a brief summary of the almost unbelievably interesting life of this living legend, and give some thoughts on how he fits philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the "Übermensch" ("Superman", or "Overman" as it is commonly referred by scholars to avoid association with the cape-wearing superhero).



Reinhold Messner in his  
1980s prime

## His Life and Deeds

Messner was born in 1944 in the Italian German-speaking town of Brixen surrounded by the Dolomite mountains. He was the oldest of nine brothers and one sister. From an early age, he and the second oldest brother, Günther, had a passion for climbing and would escape from church and school to climb the stone walls around the village. By their early twenties, Reinhold and Günther were among the best climbers in Europe in the relatively new style of free climbing, and had put together an impressive resume of climbs in the Alps. In 1970, they were invited to a Himalayan expedition to climb the 8000-meter Nanga Parbat. Trying to beat the bad weather forecast,

Reinhold left camp alone to make the peak's summit, followed secretly by Günther. They both reached the top, climbing the tallest continuous rock face in the world (which is still unrepeated today), but got lost in a storm on the descent and took an alternate traverse route down the other side (which is also unrepeated). After four days without food in -40C temperatures, they became separated and Günther lost to an avalanche while Reinhold crawled and limped his way to a village, where he was carried to safety. He had severe frostbite and seven toes were amputated. The psychological scars have haunted Reinhold ever since (it was only in 2005 that some of Günther's body was found and recovered), and the physical damage of frostbite forced him to change his climbing style and focus more on high mountaineering rather than free climbing. The events of this perilous expedition were told in a 2010 German movie entitled *Nanga Parbat*.

After 1970, Messner began compiling amazing feats of mountain climbing and pushing the limits of what was considered physically possible. Over the next 35 years or so he would go on annual expeditions to every corner of the planet with the highest mountains, coldest temperatures, and most extreme conditions. In 1978 he, along with his partner Peter Habeler, became the first to climb Mt. Everest without the use of supplemental oxygen, which was long thought to be impossible. Many people did not believe that they had actually achieved this feat, so two years later, in 1980, Messner climbed Everest again without oxygen by another more difficult route, and was the first person to climb the mountain alone (previously thought to be a suicidal endeavor). Already by 1975 he became the first person to have climbed three of the 8000-meter mountains. In 1986 with his ascent of Lhotse, he became the first person to climb all 14 8000-meter peaks, all done without supplemental oxygen. Today, only 15 people have accomplished this feat. In 1979 on K2, the most fatal peak in the world, Messner led a team that featured Renato Casarotto, an Italian who hailed from my adopted home of Vicenza. In

1984, along with Hans Kammerlander, Messner climbed two 8000-meter peaks consecutively without returning to base camp—Gasherbrum I and II. Out of the dozens of ascents and attempted ascents in the Himalayas, Messner put up many new routes that had never been done before, made the first winter ascent of several peaks, and survived many huge high-mountain storms and illnesses.

The list of things done by Messner even outside of Himalayan and Karakorum alpinism is too long to tell. Here are some highlights. In 1986 he became the second person to complete the “Messner list” of the highest mountain on each continent (and first person to not use oxygen). In 1974 he set a speed record for the Eiger North Face of 10 hours, which stood for 34 years. He established new routes on Denali, Kilimanjaro, Aconcagua, and at least 100 other mountains around the world. He led rescue expeditions and mountain cleaning expeditions on multiple continents. He did a solo expedition in 1988 beginning a 12-year search for the mythical Yeti that he had seen several times (spoiler: he concluded that they are some type of nocturnal bear; his critics thought he had become a crackpot whose brain had been deprived of too much oxygen, but an independent Japanese study later confirmed the rare Himalayan bear). In 1989, he, along with Arved Fuchs, became the first person to cross Antarctica over the South Pole on foot with only human power – a 2800-kilometer journey. In 1993 he also crossed the length of Greenland on foot – a 2200-kilometer journey, and in 2004 he did a 2000-kilometer crossing of the Gobi Desert on foot. He has written or contributed to over 60 books about his various expeditions, and eventually became personally wealthy from his sponsorships, speaking fees, and book sales. His primary summer residence since 1983 has been the 13th century Juval Castle in apple-growing Val Venosta near the borders of Austria and Switzerland, which is now one of his six museums.

From 1999-2004 he was an elected Member of the European Parliament with the Green Party. Since 2004 or so, he has mostly been retired from climbing and adventure and spends his time planning and managing the Messner Mountain Museums. He speaks fluent Italian, German, and English, and is an interesting and entertaining speaker on any subject as a quick Youtube search will attest.

Messner is famous for his fierce advocacy of “Alpine-style” climbing, rather than the traditional “expedition style” which he referred to as “siege tactics”. His goal was to climb a mountain quickly with a light load using the speed and skill of individual climbers rather than teams of dozens of porters and base camps crawling up the mountains and relying on set ropes and pre-location of stores. This style has since become the only respectable method of high mountaineering. He is also deeply concerned with environmental issues and conservation, especially in the mountainous areas of the world. He is an advocate for Tibetan independence, and has great respect and concern for the cultures of traditional peoples around the world he has encountered throughout his life. One of his museums, in Bruneck Castle, is dedicated to the cultures of mountain peoples around the world.



Messner, fit and hirsute at age 72, at the opening of his last museum.

Is Messner a Nietzschean Übermensch?

Nietzsche is one of those philosophers who are still

controversial amongst other philosophers, and is only known by a couple famous phrases to most of the public. His works are aphoristic and open to a variety of interpretations. People associate him with the Nazi regime because they used his ideas for their own purposes, even though he hated Germany, nationalism, and authority. I have commented on Nietzsche at further length in a previous post ([Bertrand Russell on Nietzsche](#)), but after additional reflection and perspective my views towards Nietzsche are more open now than before. I think that like almost anyone who had many ideas, some of them are useful, some of them not; that is my feeling about Nietzsche. Regardless, I think his is a personal, not a political, philosophy, and should be used for personal development rather than for social or political change.

Messner has stated that his favorite philosopher is Milarepa, an 11th century Tibetan master who climbed mountains and eventually flew away. Messner also quotes directly or indirectly in his books and interviews from Nietzsche, whom he obviously admires. Like Nietzsche, Messner is a controversial figure, mostly due to his enormous ego and inability to take criticism. As all of Messner's peers attest, however, he has walked the walk and someone of his stature has the right to make his own rules and act his own way. Messner shares traits with people who are considered the best in their field, be it sport or the arts or business; unlike most every other field, though, extreme mountain climbing carries high risk of death on every expedition. Anyone who has spent time doing serious mountaineering, rock climbing, or any extreme cold weather activity knows that no words can describe the feeling of a timeless present pushing forward against the force of nature, brain emptied of all worries except survival. This is why there is nothing else like it. Messner is a larger than life personality with unreal achievements, a living tour de force who redefines the limits of human potential not only in sport but in any activity.

I will end with a few select quotes by Messner and then by Nietzsche, and you can ponder and perhaps take some useful example for your own life, some boundaries to push or challenge to undertake.

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### Quotes by Reinhold Messner

“The truly free climber is the one who obeys no rules.”

“My Übermensch is a self-determined person who would never accept something, some rules from up high up. He would say, This is my way, and I go this way. And this would be the great enemy of the fascist.”

“I expose myself, I accept the natural powers as the rulers of my world,” Reinhold says of being on the mountains. “There’s no more human rulers if I’m out there. There’s no religion which is controlling me and telling me how I have to behave. There’s just pure nature, which I have to respect. The nature is myself, and the nature outside.”

“When I finished the 8000-meter peaks, I understood, now I could only repeat myself. What I did is boring now. But I like to go somewhere where everything is new, and to begin again an activity.”

### Quotes by Friedrich Nietzsche (especially from Thus Spake Zarathustra)

“He who climbs upon the highest mountains laughs at all tragedies, real or imaginary.”

“Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Übermensch—a rope over an abyss. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end.”

“The higher we soar the smaller we appear to those who cannot fly.”

“You say ‘I’ and you are proud of this word. But greater than this—although you will not believe in it—is your body and its great intelligence, which does not say ‘I’ but performs ‘I’.”

“There is more wisdom in your body than in your deepest philosophy.”

“On the mountains of truth, you never climb in vain: either you will reach a point higher up today, or you will be training your powers so that you will be able to climb higher tomorrow.”

“Those who can breathe the air of my writings know that it is an air of the heights, a strong air. One must be able to be made for it. Otherwise there is no small danger that one may catch cold in it. The ice is near, the solitude tremendous—but how calmly all things lie in the light! How freely one breathes! How much one feels beneath oneself! Philosophy, as I have so far understood and lived it, means living voluntarily among ice and high mountains—seeking out everything strange and questionable in existence, everything so far placed under a ban by morality.”

“A mind that aspires to great things, and that wills the means thereto, is necessarily skeptical. Freedom from any sort of conviction belongs to strength, and to an independent point of view.”

“I am impassioned for independence; I sacrifice all for it, and am tortured more by the smallest strings than others are by chains.”

“Danger alone points us with our own resources: our virtues, our armor and weapons, our spirit, and forces us to be strong. First principle: one must need to be strong—otherwise one will never become strong.”