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Educational visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau

As a student of 'Peace and Conflict' studies I've often been struck by the phrase that 'memorialisation without action becomes part of the problem'. The role of active memorialisation and the way in which remembering the past can positively inform future actions clung heavily to me as I visited the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau in May 2017.

Leaving behind the buzz of the city of Krakow, with its busy streets and bustling culture, I travelled to the sites, shrouded by a sense of uneasiness that I would soon be treading on the same ground that so many had before me, knowing what we do now that they were to be met by such unexplainable suffering, whereas I would be free to once again resume my everyday life and day to day existence.

What first struck me was that the initial gravity and scale of the suffering experienced at these camps made the reality difficult to fathom and comprehend. I was taken-aback by the well-polished operational side of the memorial site, and the multitudes of people of different languages and cultures who had come to pay their respect to those who had suffered here and to remember the atrocities of the past. The silent footsteps of hundreds of people and brushing shoulders with others jarred with my initial desire to contemplate in solitude the events that occurred resulting in the ultimate murder of millions of innocent people.

However, it soon occurred to me that there was a level of collective anguish, despair and outrage that arose from the number of people there, one that was demonstrative of a common commitment to ensure that these atrocities would never happen again. There arose a sense of solidarity between the visitors, of steeled glances of collective shock and disgust at the horrors that unfolded in those places.

The huge number of people that pass through the now memorial sites of Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau seem to me to form a collective act of memorialisation. However, is this enough, and in participating in this process of remembrance do we actively work to ensure that such events and atrocities are never committed again? Indeed, I was lead to question whether through our act of remembering, are we taking an active step of positive social participation? In taking time to visit and pay respect to the millions that suffered under the cruel hand of the Nazi regime are we taking a positive step forward to ensure that such atrocities are not given the space to grow again in the future, or does this act of memorialisation fail to call us to further action or response?

During the tour, I noticed the guides repeated insistence that some of the perpetrators of the heinous crimes committed at the sites were normal, ordinary individuals, who became wrapped up in this regime of genocide. Through the reassertion of this fact, it was almost as if he was encouraging us as individuals to check ourselves, our own biases that we may hold and our ability to be passively involved in allowing things we disagree with to continue within society.

It was through this that the act of memorialisation seemed to me to take on the ability to inform future positive action. In allowing the act of memorialisation to change the way in which we think and to therefore impact upon future action, the space and role that sites of memorialisation create seem vitally important, to not only educate but inform the future in such a way that the horrors of the past will never be repeated.

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