The American writer David Rieff makes a provocative case for an ‘ethics of forgetting’, and to let bygones be bygones

The Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit maintains there is an “ethics of memory”, a moral duty to remember great crimes such as the Holocaust. Rieff replies that there is an “ethics of forgetting”, a duty not to drag past events into the present, to let bygones be bygones. Rieff’s argument is at its best as a plea for political moderation, rather than moral absolutism, when societies have to face up to painful legacies in their past. This has been a burning issue in South Africa’s shift from apartheid, Spain’s transition to democracy and Chile’s reckoning with the crimes of General Pinochet. Absolute advocates of the duty of remembering want past crimes to be punished no matter what, while those on the side of forgetting plead that justice will jeopardise peace and a stable transition.

“Remembrance may be the ally of justice,” Rieff writes, but “it is no reliable friend of peace.” He points out that Spain managed the transition from dictatorship in the late 1970s thanks to a pact of oblivion, an agreement to forget the crimes of the Franco regime for the sake of the peaceful introduction of democracy. In Chile, likewise, President Patricio Aylwin chose to inch his way towards democratic rule rather than put Pinochet on trial for his crimes.

Rieff does not always choose forgetting over remembering. He would obviously welcome the recent conviction of Radovan Karadzic for his part in the Srebrenica massacre of 1995. He concedes that justice is a good thing, especially in this case, but it is only justice, not healing, not even closure, since some Serbians fear they will continue to deny the findings of the court in the Hague till their dying day. In other cases – Germany after the Second World War, for example, where the judicial pursuit of every Nazi official still looms large – the bureaucracy would have brought the whole society to a juddering halt – it is far better to let sleeping dogs lie.

Rieff’s essay is a frontal attack on what he sees as an unreasoning assault on the role of the “ethics of forgetting”. Sometimes, he argues that the duty of remembering depends on context. If so, he leaves us without guidelines to help us decide in which contexts we should remember and in which to forget.

He is also the son of Philip Rieff, one of the great intellectual historians of psychoanalysis, so it is strange that his account of the great intellectual historians of psychoanalysis, so it is strange that his account of the

Better to forget and move on

Those who can’t forget the past will be imprisoned by it

The profound insight in John Kenneth Galbraith’s remark, “Nothing is so admirable in politics as a short memory,” is that the philosopher Avishai Margalit maintains there is an “ethics of memory”, a moral duty to remember great crimes such as the Holocaust. Rieff replies that there is an “ethics of forgetting”, a duty not to drag past events into the present, to let bygones be bygones.