



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *The Politics of Consolation: Memory and the Meaning of September 11*. By Christina Simko. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xii+290..

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/95042/>

Version: Published Version

---

**Article:**

Holland, J [orcid.org/0000-0003-4883-332X](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4883-332X) (2016) The Politics of Consolation: Memory and the Meaning of September 11. By Christina Simko. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xii+290. *American Journal of Sociology*, 122 (1). pp. 297-298. ISSN 0002-9602

<https://doi.org/10.1086/686047>

---

**Reuse**

See Attached

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

portant part of this study, illustrating, as this book does, Theodor Adorno's famous quote, "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth" (*Negative Dialectics* [Continuum, 1973, pp. 17–18]).

*The Politics of Consolation: Memory and the Meaning of September 11.* By Christina Simko. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xii+290.

Jack Holland  
*University of Leeds*

The events of 9/11 have been something of a preoccupation for social scientists, but, as Christina Simko's excellent book *The Politics of Consolation* demonstrates, further studies of 9/11 are necessary for three reasons. First, the tool kit of the interpretive sociologist can bring important new insights, helping us to make sense of the ways in which the meaning of that day and its events have come to be understood. Second, 9/11 is not done: the events of September 11, 2001, continue to be (re)written as the reality of what is referenced by those four keystrokes is still up for grabs. And, third, this process matters for real and political reasons; the meaning of 9/11 is the central underpinning axiom of the current sociopolitical era. In short, this topic and this book matter a great deal, nearly 15 years from the day and the events themselves.

Simko has produced an extremely well-written book, which is a pleasure to read, despite drawing frequently on the sociological literature. The book begins with pertinent discussions of the politics of suffering and consolation (for the nation), as well as, crucially, considering the role of cultural trauma around moments of (inter)national crises. A number of themes come to the fore, including the centrality of narrative in the modern rhetorical presidency, as political leaders are required to construct frameworks of meaning for the nation and its citizens. From here the book progresses, in its first half, to consider the role and history of the consolation genre through American political history. Simko shows how political elites draw upon a dualistic and, less frequently acknowledged, tragic mode in the construction of memory and meaning, very often in response to perceived key events. This framework and history set the ground for the book's second half (and principal task), which traces the construction of the memory and meaning of September 11, 2001. The book concludes, powerfully but sensitively, with a normative call to shift dominant American forms of remembering and constructing "9/11" from the dualistic to the tragic mode. Bill Clinton, the author suggests, has previously and effectively employed this mode, emphasizing loss, hope, and compassion rather than moral binaries.

Make no mistake: this is a scholarly and impressive book. My initial critiques of it are limited to three areas: calls for extension, elaboration, and exclusion, before considering a larger issue of engagement. First, I would like to

see two of the book's empirical insights extended. In revealing differences (and a divergence) in the process of constructing the memory and meaning of 9/11, which is dependent upon actor and location, the book makes an interesting and important empirical contribution, which can provide even greater ballast for its normative position. Likewise, and allied to its theoretical setup and analysis, the book usefully but briefly highlights nonverbal processes in the construction of meaning and memory. Second, one key theoretical concept requires further elaboration. The term "effect flow" is frequently invoked and appears central to the author's understanding of why this process matters and how the key components involved in it relate to each other. This mapping and setup is inevitably delicate and nuanced and must therefore be elaborated. Third, in its final stages the book delves into comparative analysis, with a limited exploration of the British response to 7/7, which might ultimately have better been excluded. These are small critiques of a very good text. A larger issue that the book makes clear, however, is of greater significance for the discipline: the importance of engagement across disciplinary boundaries.

Greater engagement with literature beyond the discipline of sociology would enhance this book. Some absences are surprising (e.g., Derrida on the dualistic mode or geographers on the "sacred ground" of Ground Zero). In particular, I was struck by the absence of references to the wealth of relevant research in politics and international relations, in which analyses of national narratives of 9/11 are plentiful. Simko suggests that "there is much work to be done to probe the ever-shifting, but still critically important, role of the nation and its leaders as a source and arbiter of meaning in our world" (p. 208). While surely correct, this claim is made without reference to works in the discipline that most frequently does explore this exact topic (since Benedict Anderson's seminal text). The author will find an army of support for the book's argument that we need to rethink and rescript 9/11. Allies can be found in Richard Jackson, Stuart Croft, and Jenny Edkins, all of whom have written influential works on the construction of the meaning of 9/11 amid and through the cultural trauma the day inspired. Many more have employed critical and constructivist approaches to the study of 9/11, including its meaning and memory.

This book remains, however, one that should be widely read: it is well researched and marries theory with empirics through lucid prose. Most important, it presents an important analysis and argument, which contributes to a body of work trying to redress the worst excesses of post-9/11 politics and foreign policy. And, in the wake of the recent terrorist attacks in Paris, it is clear that these lessons are also (urgently) applicable more widely.