

Modernity and the Holocaust

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In his book, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation*,¹ the historian Omer Bartov has collected eight essays, some previously published, and has ordered them in three sections: “Images of War and the Emergence of Industrial Killing”, “The Holocaust: Histories, Memories, Stories”, and “The Aesthetics of Murder: Visual Representations of Evil”. This brief review essay cannot hope to sound all of the various issues raised. Instead, it focuses on the book’s unifying theme, the problem of the Holocaust and “Modernity”. To understand what Bartov is trying to do, it is necessary to sketch his understanding of the position he opposes:

There is a common tendency to view the Holocaust as a well-ordered plot, in which antisemitism led to Nazism, Nazism practiced genocide, and both were destroyed in a spectacular ‘happy end’. This is a tale most people would like to believe, university students and filmgoers, book readers and television viewers (p. 53).

He would prefer that we did not believe it, because it “fails to recognize that this extreme instance of industrial killing was generated by a society, economic system, and civilization of which our contemporary society is a direct continuation”. It leads to a “false understanding of the present”, and thereby “legitimize(s) inaction and indifference, conformity and complacency” (pp. 8-10).

Understanding himself as the critical intellectual, very much in the minority, Bartov wants to liberate the Holocaust from this interpretation, which he sees embodied, above all, in Holocaust museums, so it can serve as a warning to us about the continuing dangers residing in contemporary civilisation. It is necessary, therefore, to extend Holocaust discourse “far beyond the limits of the death camps [to] encompass the general problems we face today in writing on the history of humanity and in seeking to distil its meaning for our own culture and society” (p. 117).

What are these general problems? It is readily apparent that in answering this question Bartov has been greatly influenced by Zygmunt Bauman’s book, *Modernity and the Holocaust*.² On this view, the Holocaust is taken to be emblematic of Western modernity, shattering its smug, liberal self-understanding of incremental progress. Not an aberration or dark side of an otherwise salutary modernisation process, the Holocaust was an “extreme and inherent potential” of modernity’s characteristic ingredients, namely the differentiation of state from society, the apotheosis of instrumental reason in professional establishments and an omnipotent state bureaucracy, and the evacuation of morality from the public sphere.

Bartov singles out lawyers, doctors and scientists, the “essence of our modern existence”, for special attention, because without their advocacy and approval, the ultimately lethal, pseudo-scientific legitimation of anti-Semitism, and its legal manifestation in racial laws, could never have occurred (pp. 68f). What remained after the Holocaust and the attrition of anti-Semitism were the structures that made it possible in the first place: legal and scientific professionals with the power of categorising and marginalising “superfluous” segments of the population. For example, in the United

States some scientists consider proven different intelligence capacities among the various “races” comprising the population (p. 5).

Instrumental reason's nefarious effect is not merely a consequence of its institutionalisation in powerful bureaucracies and elite professional establishments. It is also a result of its work in the service of an enlightenment utopianism that seeks to transform humanity according to racial or class blueprints, unconstrained by traditional or normative claims, which are bereft of standing in a disenchanted world. In his book Bauman went so far as to argue that the modernising process tends to issue in totalitarian projects of regeneration unless resisted by social groups (and presumably, intellectuals like himself): “They [totalitarian regimes] showed what the rationalizing, designing, controlling dreams and efforts of modern civilization can accomplish if not mitigated, curbed, or counteracted”.³ In the post-totalitarian world, the customisation of society continues in the efforts of the administrative state to solve social and political problems.

Bartov similarly highlights the dark side of modernity's emancipatory aspirations: “we wish to annihilate destruction, to kill war, to eradicate genocide by the most effective and deadly means at our disposal”. In a relentless dialectic of Enlightenment, modernity's nature is revealed as “destructive, unrelenting, [and] intolerant”, although it is unclear how Bartov would judge a modernity that tolerated racism, for he himself has no tolerance for it (p. 4). In any event, no longer can the West entertain notions of linking technological advance with moral progress. As the renaissance of ethnic violence in post-communist Europe and elsewhere testifies, humanity plays a “devil's game” in an ironic story of development and regression, in which the institutions of emancipation defeat the purposes for which they were established (pp. 69ff, 113).

Bartov adds his own twist to Bauman's equation of modernity and instrumental reason. As the author of two books on the barbarisation of warfare on the eastern front during the Second World War, he is well aware of the close nexus between the Holocaust and the war.⁴ In *Murder in Our Midst*, he extends the connection to the First World War and its epochal effect on the European imagination. Not just instrumental reason, but its radicalisation in waging the first total war, is the key variable in explaining the Holocaust and the dark potential of modernity. The war's ultimate purpose was “to produce corpses with the same methods employed to produce goods”, thereby linking mass human destruction with the goal of production. He calls this “industrial killing,” without which the Holocaust would have been “unimaginable” (p. 23). Moreover, the motivation for the so-called “Final Solution” was rooted in the “hell-like” impression made by this first experience of industrial killing. So frightened were German elites of losing the next conflict, that they sought to ensure their victory by perpetrating a “militarized genocide” on their apprehended enemies (pp. 48f).⁵

There is much to be said for extending the Holocaust's message in the manner of Bartov and Bauman. The question they and others ask is how the state becomes a killing machine, because the key variable in genocide, as they see it, is the sponsorship of the state, rather than ethnic conflict, which is a constant feature of the human condition (p. 92). This fact explains the difference between the German army's killing of 600,000 Russians in the first weeks of “Operation Barbarossa”, in 1941, and the massacre of Vietnamese by US troops at My Lai: the former was government policy and the latter was not.⁶ It is also indisputable that the ambition of systematic genocide is unthinkable without the bureaucratic and technical achievements of modernity. The morality of liberal tolerance is an insufficient bulwark against that uniquely lethal cocktail of circumstances that only modernity is capable of producing: “the mixture of ideological fanaticism, psycho-pathological disturbance, moral indifference, and bureaucratic perfectionism”.⁷ Yet this can only be half the story. The important issues that Bartov and Bauman address

are the *efficient*, and not the *final*, causes of the Holocaust — the background preconditions, rather than the effective motivation.⁸ The “tale” that Bartov rejects is an attempt to explain the latter. In their accounts, there is a tendency to underplay the radical novelty of Nazi anti-Semitism in the modernising process. Both write as if it was just another, if extreme, example of ethnic rivalry, whose distinguishing feature was its massive implementation, inspired and facilitated by modern bureaucracy and technology (p. 66). The specific motivation is taken for granted. Instrumental reason can, to be sure, explain how it was so easy for Jews to be segregated and murdered. For Bartov, however, the fact that Jews were singled out is evidently not the most important lesson from the Holocaust.

Under different circumstances, the victims could be determined according to other categories, similarly legitimised by those institutions whose accumulation of knowledge inaccessible to the lay citizen puts them above our control and provides them with almost unlimited power in our industrial, bureaucratic, complex societies (p. 9).

For this reason, he argues that racism is not the key to understanding the Holocaust: it “merely determines the identity of the victims” (p. 9).

But this is manifestly false. As Daniel Jonah Goldhagen rightly insists in his controversial book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, racism also provides the will to kill.⁹ The Nazi will to kill, the Holocaust's final cause, cannot be reduced to instrumental reason, science, or any other factor. Moreover, it was anything but an ordinary ethnic hatred. Goldhagen justifiably points to its “hallucinatory and metaphysical” nature, as well as to the cruelty with which Jews were killed, which did not mark the euthanasia programme, for example. The inhabitants of eastern European *shtetls* were not involved in “age-old ethnic conflicts” with Germans: they could only be deemed “enemies of Germany” by a wildly paranoid National Socialist imagination. Their murder is inexplicable in terms of the normal continuum of racial tension. The question is where such extraordinary, phantasmagorical images come from, as well as how they become government policy.

Bauman, to be sure, has a brief, suggestive discussion of the way in which assimilated, Western European Jews transgressed an anthropological need for boundary maintenance, but he ends up arguing implausibly that modern racism was merely a “modern weapon for pre-modern battles”, in “the tradition of inter-group antagonism”.¹⁰ Moreover, he downplays the motivating effect of ideology in the name of an extreme functionalism. The “most shattering” lesson of the Holocaust, he writes, is that “the choice of physical extermination ... was the product of routine bureaucratic procedures: means-ends calculation, budget-balancing, universal rule application”.¹¹ One can agree that the Holocaust teaches many lessons, but is this really its most shattering? Bartov similarly alludes to the discourse of ideological purity and consequent tendency to political “purging” that began with the French Revolution (pp. 32ff).¹² But the discussion is sketchy, and the question of why Jews should have been the object of such a mechanism remains unanswered.

Bartov and Bauman cannot account for that aspect of the Holocaust rightly highlighted by Goldhagen — the will to kill Jews. So general are the conclusions that Bartov draws, especially in his abstraction of “industrial killing”, and so intense is the causal nexus with the First World War, that the specificity of Jewish victimhood vanishes altogether. Bartov would resist this interpretation. He has, after all, placed great weight on the importance of ideology in his historical studies, and for that reason rejects Christopher Browning's “ordinary men” thesis.¹³ He is also critical of Detlev Peukert for over-playing the generality of modern discourses of science, technology and racial hygiene at the expense of their particular German instantiation (pp. 93, 208, n59).¹⁴ The fact remains, however,

that the modernity-Holocaust equation cannot explain why “industrial killing” does not persist in “fully modernized” countries in North America and Western Europe.¹⁵ The genocidal ambitions in Rwanda do not appear to have emanated from a specifically modern pathology. Something is missing in the West, namely the will to kill certain groups in the population. The “patina of civilization” may indeed be thin, as Hans Mommsen notes, but Bartov goes too far when he asserts that the “single lesson to be drawn specifically from the Holocaust ... is that precisely our own society, our political and economic institutions, as well as mass and individual psychology, contain the potential for another such genocide” (p. 182). The only groups making claims such as his today are anti-abortion protesters, who indict doctors and lawyers, his very villains, for making the procedure possible. Whether he condones this use of the Holocaust metaphor is not the issue. What is at issue, is the ease with which the Holocaust memory can be instrumentalised when its meaning is evacuated of concrete historical content.

Bartov, of course, has no wish to relativise or instrumentalise the Holocaust. But if we are to account satisfactorily for the occurrence of the Holocaust, and thereby gain a balanced picture of the ingredients in the recipe of genocide, it is necessary to attend to its efficient and final causes. This does not mean abandoning the potent reservoir of cultural critical insights that the Holocaust offers. One of the many criticisms of Goldhagen's book was that in focusing so relentlessly on the German aspect of the problem, it forswore any hermeneutic potential in the events it attempted to explain.¹⁶

We are not left without a compass. Dominick LaCapra has usefully suggested a theory of modernity in which anti-Semitism figures as the manifestation of a scapegoating mechanism, which is the return, in a secularised form, of religious impulses repressed in the modernising process.¹⁷ Here anti-Semitism stands as a irreducible component of Nazism, while simultaneously embedded in a broader theory of modernisation. The religious and chiliastic dimension of the Nazi's worldview has also been stressed recently by other writers.¹⁸ There is, in other words, more to National Socialism and the Holocaust than instrumental reason

Notes

- 1 (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1996), 251 pp.
- 2 2nd edition (London: Polity Press, 1991). For an example of a work inspired by it, see Donald J. Dietrich, *God and Humanity in Auschwitz: Jewish-Christian Relations and Sanctioned Murder* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Transaction, 1995), chapter 8, "The Holocaust and Modernity".
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 219.
- 4 Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-1945: German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1986); *idem*, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazism, and the War in the Third Reich* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- 5 This point is very similar to Hannah Arendt's in "Approaches to the 'German Problem'", in Jerome Kohn, ed., *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), pp. 106-20.
- 6 Omer Bartov, "Savage War", in Michael Burleigh, ed., *Confronting the Nazi Past: New Debates on Modern German History* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 121-39, 137.
- 7 Hans Mommsen, "Die dünne Patina der Zivilisation", *Die Zeit*, 30 August 1996, p. 14f; cf. Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst*, p. 67.
- 8 The criticism is also made by Ronald Aronson ("The Holocaust and Human Progress", in Alan Rosenberg, ed., *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on Dark Times* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 223-44) of George M. Kren and Leon Rappoport, *The Holocaust and the Crisis of Human Behavior* (New York: Holmes and Meir, 1980), which argues along similar lines to Bartov and Bauman.
- 9 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). For a discussion of this book see A. D. Moses, "Structure and Agency in the Holocaust", *History and Theory* (May 1998).
- 10 Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, pp. x, 33.
- 11 Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst*, pp. 17, 56, 60, 66, 176.
- 12 Such arguments share with conservative intellectuals a long tradition of distrust with aspects of the French Revolution. See Hermann Lübke, "Politische Avantgardismus oder Fortschritt und Terror", *Universitas* 1 (1992), pp. 1-15.
- 13 Christopher Browning (in *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992) argued that non-ideological, situational factors were decisive in the systematic shooting of tens of thousands of defenceless Jewish families by civilian policemen.
- 14 Detlev Peukert, "The Genesis of the Final Solutions from the Spirit of Science", in Thomas Childers and Jane Caplan, ed., *Re-evaluating the Third Reich*, (New York: Holmes and Meir, 1993), pp. 234-52.
- 15 Martin Jay, "Postmodern Fascism? Reflections on the Return of the Oppressed", *Tikkun* 8, 6 (November-December 1993), pp. 37-44.
- 16 Jorn Rüsen, "Den Holocaust erklären — aber wie?", *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 25 June 1996, p. 11; and, of course, Bartov, "Ordinary Monsters", *New Republic*, 29 April 1996, pp. 32-38.
- 17 Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 92, 99f.
- 18 See most recently, Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 2 vols (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997). Volume One is called *The Years of Persecution, 1933-39* (New York, 1997). He relies on the work of Uriel Tal, "On Structures of Political Theology and Myth in Germany Prior to the Holocaust", in Yehuda Bauer and Nathan Rotenstreich, eds, *The Holocaust as Historical Experience* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981), pp. 43-76.