

“Good Nations” and “Bad Nations”: Critical Theory, Judgement and the Naturalisation of Memory

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1 Introduction

This essay investigates the connections between representations of the Holocaust within public memory and within critical theory. It argues that far from offering a critique of that memory, critical theory unwittingly replicates many of its assumptions. This replication appears through acceptance of the assumed distinction between the “good nations” of Western Europe and the “bad nations” of Eastern Europe; those nations who have been remembered as unwilling collaborators, and those deemed more willing, respectively.

The essay is organised in the following way. First, turning to the question of “public memory” of the Holocaust, I outline the distinctions within it between “West” and “East” Europe; between “good nations” and “bad nations”. Secondly, through discussing contemporary critical theoretical accounts of the Holocaust, I show how such accounts, far from challenging these elements of memory, reinforce them further. At the centre of this reinforcement is a marked distinction in the treatment of the nature of the ethnic nationalism that, although said to be common to the Holocaust in its entirety, is characterised in distinct ways when dealing with their expression in West and East Europe. More specifically, I argue that whilst for the West, this “ethnic nationalism” that incorporates within it its impulse to genocide, is treated as an “artifice”, as an “external imposition” or something not indigenous to

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the history of the West, when it comes to the East, a more *naturalist* perspective is adopted.

Having raised questions concerning issues of legal responsibility and judgement as well as that of the recognition of contemporary antisemitism, I conclude by reflecting upon this failure of critical theory to meet one of its original purposes; to bring into relief the complex social and political underpinnings of what is taken at first hand as “natural phenomena”. I include within the essay a discussion of images of the visual history of the Holocaust—East and West—that have achieved iconic status within the public memory of “Europe” and which serve as visual articulations of the arguments presented in this essay.

2 Modern and Post-Modern Europe: the Overcoming of Genocidal Antisemitism?

Within the context of “post-Holocaust” (Western) Europe, antisemitism is treated as an anachronism. Brought into being in conscious awareness of what immediately preceded it, the era of European history that gave rise to genocidal antisemitism now appears as firmly closed. Discussing new Europe’s self-presentation as “post-national” and “post-modern”, Fine outlines what he terms its “reassuring narrative”. From the perspective of the present,

The rise of political antisemitism in the late nineteenth century and its consolidation as an exterminatory antisemitism in the twentieth century, are associated with the ethnic nationalism that prevailed in Europe at the time, *especially in Germany and Eastern Europe*, while the end of antisemitism is associated with the universal civil values now embodied in the European Union and European Convention on Human Rights.....This reassuring narrative looks back to an era in which antisemites saw themselves as guardians of the ethnically pure nation-state, and forward to a post-national Europe in which antisemitism is remembered, but only as a residual trauma or a museum piece.....Thus, the idea of Europe as the civilised continent is rescued from the wreckage [11; 463].

It is through the prism of what Fine terms the “banality” of this “Europeanist” [11; 463] way of thinking”, that contemporary images and perceptions of Eastern Europe in general, and of Eastern Europe’s antisemitism in particular, are formed.

3 “Good Nations” and “Bad Nations”

Almost immediately following knowledge of the mass-extirmination of Jews, there was, and continues to be, a tendency within the popular memory of the West, to fetishize and ontologise (or naturalise) *East* European antisemitism. What I mean here is that, immediately following the Holocaust and beyond, European memory has effected a division between “good” nations and “bad” nations. The “good” nations were those who are remembered to have taken part in the extermination of

Jews *unwillingly* and as against their better “national” character and instincts. They were remembered, to paraphrase Daniel Goldhagen, [14] as Hitler’s *unwilling* executioners. The “bad” nations were those who were perceived as being not only willing, but also *enthusiastic* participants. In general, this distinction between “good” and “bad” was drawn along the lines of West and East Europe respectively (Holland, Italy, France, Belgium, Norway being the “good” and Germany, [14] Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, Hungary Romania. Hungary and Poland (even though Poland had ceased to exist) as the “bad”.¹

Perhaps the clearest illustration of this perception comes from the universally acclaimed *Schindler’s List*. In this film, images of Poles are virtually limited to a young Polish girl’s face contorted with hatred as she screams, “Good-bye Jews!” as victims were herded into the ghetto” and of a Polish boy signalling the fate awaiting Jews on a train “to the East” by running his finger across his neck [19]. These scenes in turn can be contrasted with the seemingly cold, unemotional, modern “rational (i.e. bureaucratic)” methods that characterise the earlier scenes of the round up of Jews in Germany.

At this juncture, it is interesting to note that these images, drawn from the world of mainstream, popular cinema finds an echo within contemporary critical thinking around the question of the connections made between nationalism, antisemitism and the Holocaust. This point comes into relief in the writings of Jurgen Habermas.

In offering an account of the modern nation-state, Habermas reveals a tension that he rightly sees as inherent in the (dualistic) concept of the “nation-state”. Habermas argues that the integrationist function of the modern nation-state necessitated by the collapse of feudalism occurs in two distinct but related ways; that of “constitutional patriotism” and that of “cultural nationalism”. Constitutional patriotism points to national membership cohered through the glue of liberal democratic processes, subjective rights and the rule of law. Conversely, cultural nationalism treats the nation-state as the vehicle for the expression of a pre-existing “people” whose identity is believed to be the product of common descent, common language and common culture” [15; 107]

Although Habermas notes the tension in all nation-states of these two concepts of integration through a chronological reading that moves from an eighteenth century model of constitutional patriotism to that of a 19th century cultural nationalism, he draws a distinction also between the “classical nation-states in Northern and Western Europe” and those of “Central and Eastern Europe”,

The classical nation-states in Northern and Western Europe evolved within the boundaries of existing territorial states. They were part of the European state system which already took on a recognizable shape with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. *By contrast*, the “belated” nations—beginning with Italy and Germany—followed a different course, one which was also typical for the formation of nation-states in Central and Eastern Europe; here the formation of the state followed the trail blazed by an anticipatory national consciousness disseminated by propaganda.....With the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the

¹ For an account of the origins and reasons for the durability of such dichotomies [10].

tend toward the formation of independent nation-states in Eastern and Southern Europe has followed the path of more or less violent secessions; in the socially and economically precarious situation in which these countries found themselves, the old ethno-national slogans had the power to mobilize distraught populations for independence [15, pp. 105–106].

Coinciding with this distinction between “classical” and “cultural” nation-states, Habermas notes the narratives of “artifice” and “nature” at play in their construction. For the former nation-states, most notably those that came into existence following the Revolutions of the late-eighteenth century, Habermas brings into relief the artifice of the nation-building programme by reference to its “cogent response to the historical challenge to find a functional equivalence for the early modern form of social integration that was in the process of disintegration” [15; 106] that resulted in the liberal body politic replete with its limited state administered by a rational bureaucracy and a civil society mediated both through the state and in itself by positive law and juridical rights. Conversely, the “cultural” nations, whilst equally the product of artifice, of constructivist myths, *appeared* as natural phenomena alongside a “naturalist conception of the people”,

While national consciousness itself may very well be an artefact, it projects the imaginary reality of the notion of an organic development which, in contrast with the artificial order of enacted law and the construction of the constitutional state, needs no justification beyond its sheer existence. For this reason, recourse to the “organic” nation can conceal the contingency of the historically more or less arbitrary boundaries of the political community and can lend them an aura of imitated substance and “inherited” legitimacy [15; p. 116].

It is in this context of “cultural nationalism” that Habermas locates modern antisemitism. If, as implied above, the rationality of “constitutional patriotism” and its emphasis on law and legal relations speaks to a national inclusiveness, regardless of “ethnicity”, it is the myth of a homogenous and “naturalist” ethno-nationalism that is treated as the cause of exclusion in general and of exclusion of Jews in particular,

Popular national consciousness crystallized into “imagined communities” (Benedict Anderson) propagated in national histories, which became the catalysts of a new form of collective self-identification.....To the extent that this idea took root, however, it became apparent that, with its transformation from the concept of an aristocratic nation into that of a nation of the people, the political concept had inherited the power to generate stereotypes from the older, prepolitical concept of the nation as an index of descent and origin. The positive self-understanding of one’s own nation now became an efficient mechanism for repudiating everything regarded as foreign, for devaluing other nations, and for including national, ethnic and religious minorities, especially the Jews. In Europe nationalism became allied with antisemitism, with disastrous consequences [15, pp. 110–111].

Although this question is not addressed by Habermas directly, at a more reflective and theoretical level, this distinction between “good” and “bad” nations, between nations cohered by “constitutional patriotism” and those of ethno-nationalism, respectively, is captured in other contemporary critical thinking. The answer to this question turns on the idea that, on the one hand, *exterminatory* antisemitism was simultaneously *alien to* and an *imposition* upon an otherwise, albeit tainted, but hardly genocidal, domestic tradition of anti-Jewish hostility in the former nations, and, on the other hand, the consequence of an *organic* and *natural* antisemitism that is best captured on the language of an asocial and ahistorical idea of the “longest hatred”. The irony of this approach is that in presenting the matter in this way, Habermas’ critique of the naturalist *appearance* of the *artifice* and *construction* ethno-nationalism of Central and East European states is overlooked. It is as a consequence of this acceptance of appearance over history that the dialectic of artifice and nature that Habermas draws upon is itself naturalised. Whilst genocidal antisemitism of “good nations” is explained through the language of “artifice”, for East Europe (if not Germany itself) it is replaced by the language and imagery of “naturalism”, as something inherent within the states of the East but not in regions of the West.

There is little doubt that during the period of the Cold War, Habermas’ view of nazi antisemitism as the expression of a specifically German “ethno-nationalism” held sway as an explanatory model. Such a view served the purpose of affecting a line between a rampantly nationalist and antisemitic Germany and the liberal democratic Germany of the Federal Republic inaugurated in 1948. Germany, in other words, had now substituted “constitutional patriotism” in place of “cultural nationalism” as its mode of national integration. This view of Germany answered also the geo-political demands of that period in which the “new” Germany was to serve as a buffer and bulwark to what was seen as the threat of an encroaching Communist Eastern Europe [15].

Coinciding with the demise of the Cold War, a strand of critical thinking began to challenge this view of nazism as the expression of a specifically German ethno-nationalism, and, in its stead, in a manner that reflected the post-war political relocation of Germany from Central to Western Europe, saw its antisemitism as a product *not*, to use Habermas’ terminology, as a product of “cultural nationalism”, but, rather, as inherent within “constitutional patriotism”; that is, as imbricated within modern constitutionalism itself. Yet, despite this shift in emphasis and of cause, the stark division between West and East, between artifice and nature, continued and continues to operate as does the implicit image of a West that has overcome its (previous) antisemitic temptations and, as such, is to be compared to an unregenerate East.

4 Artifice and Nature

This shift of Germany’s location from Central to Western Europe and from an account of nazi antisemitism in terms of “artifice” over “nature” is a recurring theme in many of the “postmodern” accounts of the Holocaust that has appeared

from the late 1980's onwards. Most notable of these accounts are the works of Zygmunt Bauman [6, 7, 8] Michel Foucault [13] and Giorgio Agamben [2, 3, 4].

This notion of the Holocaust as the consequence of a conscious fabrication imposed upon and breaching the "natural" history of the nation-state comes to the fore in Bauman's work through his idea that the Holocaust was the outcome of a specifically modern Western European trajectory. He argues that the Holocaust emerged from what he terms modernity's "gardening ambitions"; that is, an ambition fuelled by the Enlightenment dream of a perfectly ordered and rational society. Bauman argues that the attempt to make this dream a reality arose from an alliance between the political power of the newly emancipated state and the knowledges of the emergent natural sciences. It is the combination of these two elements that culminated in the sharp division and distinction between those parts of the population that were to be nurtured and those parts deemed "weeds". The latter were posed as a threat not only to the former, but so too to the the modern project of rational order itself. The Jews, or rather, the concept of "the Jew" fell into the latter category [21].

Whilst Bauman acknowledges the presence of the past in the conceptualising of "the Jew" as the Other of order, he is nonetheless insistent that, first, the confluence of factors that was responsible for the Holocaust lack any pre-modern antecedents, and, secondly, that the mass murders were the consequence of the imposition of a power *external* to the body politic *upon which* it was said to operate.

A similar approach is exhibited in Michel Foucault's discussion of the Holocaust in his recently published, *Society Must be Defended*. As with Bauman, Foucault's thinking on the Holocaust turns on its presentation as "artifice". This point comes clearly into view in the distinction he makes between what he terms, "old" and "new" antisemitism,

The old religious-type anti-Semitism was reutilized by State racism only in the nineteenth century, or at the point when the State had to look like, function, and present itself as the guarantor of the integrity and purity of the race, and had to defend it against the race or races that were infiltrating it, introducing harmful elements into its body, and which, therefore, had to be driven out for both political and biological purposes [13; 88–89].

Foucault's distinction between "religious-type antisemitism" and its imbrication in "State racism" turns on his conception of "biopower" and "biopolitics". Tracing its emergence to the late-eighteenth century, Foucault identifies biopower and biopolitics as a new form of "sovereign power". In place of sovereignty's juridical power to decide on questions of life and death (which Foucault argues is, in effect, the right of the sovereign to execute), a new form of power emerges, one that is concerned with the *life* of the population as a whole which he articulates as the "power to make live and to let die" [13; 241]. "Biopolitics" is this new conception of sovereign or state power. Its novel concern is with the "life", not of individuals *per se*, but with populations. It is a concern to identify disturbances (real, potential and imagined) to the "health" of the population through which to secure its protection from such hazards.

It is within this context of biopolitics that modern antisemitism first enters the picture. Foucault argues that at first sight, the presence of racism within biopolitics is something of a paradox. How is it, he asks, that a form of power devoted to “life” should bring with it death of an almost unprecedented magnitude? His response is twofold. First, racism operates as a means of “fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls. It is a way of separating out the groups that exist in the population” [13; 255]. Secondly, the conflict that (biopolitical) racism generates, is framed in the language of “health” and “security”, as the neutralising of a threat to the well-being, to the “life” of the now separated, but racially “preferred” segment of the population. It is as a consequence of these developments that racism and antisemitism come to be perceived as a “defensive” measures,

The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees his safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier; healthier and purer. [13; 255]

Whilst the presence of biopolitics and of the racism it engenders is a constant of modern states, it is only with nazism that it reaches what Foucault terms its most “paroxysmal development” [13; 259]. What distinguishes the “nazi state” from other western states, in other words, was less its biopolitical nature, but the fact that that it merged with the “old sovereign right to take life”, a right that, with the multiplicity of institutions and organisations, as well as the “practice of informing”, was dissolved throughout the body politic as a whole. However, as Foucault makes clear, whilst biopolitics of itself was not a sufficient cause of the Holocaust, it was most definitely a necessary one.

It is with the work of Giorgio Agamben that this tendency to see the Holocaust as artifice appears in its most radical formulation. Drawing on and developing Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, Agamben makes this point overtly,

[T]he entry of *Zoē* [life] into the sphere of the *polis*—the politicization of bare life itself—constitutes the *decisive event of modernity* and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought. It is even likely, that is, politics today seems to be passing through a lasting eclipse; this is because politics has failed to reckon with this *foundational* event of modernity. [2; 4]

If, for Bauman and Foucault, a tension remains between the “two-types” of sovereignty—legal and biopolitical—and which manifests itself both in the idea of the latter operating “behind the back” of the former and of biopolitical imposing itself on an already existing body politic, Agamben dissolves such friction. Rather, biopolitics and the racism that is said to inhere within it is now read into the very nature of modern political and legal sovereignty itself,

Declarations of Rights represent the originary figure of the inscription of natural life in the juridico-political order of the nation-state.....The fiction here is that *birth* immediately becomes *nation* such that there can be no interval or separation [*scarto*] between the two terms. Rights are attributed to

man (and originate in him) solely to the extent that man is the immediately, vanishing ground (who must never come to light as such) of the citizen.....The link between politics and life...is not (as is maintained by a common and completely inadequate interpretation of racism) merely an instrumental relationship as if race were a simple natural given. The novelty of biopolitics lies in the fact that the biological given is as much *immediately* political, and the immediately political is as such immediately the biological given. [1998; 127/147–148; emphasis added]

Whilst important distinctions separate each of the works, a common unifying theme is the connection they make in subsuming the specifics of the nazi extermination of “the Jews” within the broader context of an overarching concept of a specifically *Western* modernity in general and modern political *emancipation* in particular.

The last point comes to the fore in the following ways. First, and most obviously, in a mirror image of the new Europe, the placement of genocidal antisemitism within the overarching concept of modernity, serves to deterioralize and dehistoricize the historical actuality of the Holocaust. It overlooks any consideration of why the Holocaust occurred at a specific place and at a specific time (Germany in the mid-twentieth century). In so doing, it dissolves the Holocaust’s specificities into the more abstract and universal framework of modern (i.e. old) Europe.

Implicit in this initial tendency to the dissolution of particularism of genocidal antisemitism into abstract universals is the positivist nature of its conceptual schema. As no more than expressions of a “modern project” whose aims and outcomes are read into modernity from its inception (including, genocide), related concepts such as the nation-state, sovereignty, law, nationalism, the Jews, antisemitism, etc. appear on the scene in an equally ahistorical form. These concepts’ form and content, seemingly complete in meaning from their origin are simply posited. This presentation of modernity’s conceptual schema adopts the positivist mantra that what is, simply is. They take on the power of a fate or of a nature that cannot, nor could be, otherwise. In this positivism any notion of conceptual development is correspondingly abjured [21].

The positivism of these concepts is, in turn, reinforced through the idea that their origins can be traced back to an expression of a seemingly autonomous political sovereignty. Such a view is in keeping with the notion that genocidal antisemitism is a direct result of the state’s (Bauman) or the political’s (Agamben) power to construct the body politic under its domain in an image of its own making; in this instance, of a “healthy” or “ordered” society. It is the positing of such an origin that accounts for the conflation of content that characterizes the apparent diversity of operative concepts. All concepts are held to contain within them the inherent propensity of extermination, both jointly and severally.

Two dimensions of this way of explaining the cause and practice of genocidal antisemitism is of relevance here. First, is the explicit understanding of this state *praxis* as strictly bound in time and space. Geographically limited to the Enlightenment of “Western” Europe (which is now said to include Germany) this era is presented as a “rupture” in history, as something discontinuous with both that

which preceded it (the pre-modern era) and what is said to have succeeded it (the post-modern and post-national “new Europe”). Secondly, is the related idea that genocidal antisemitism is solely the product of an apparently omnipotent State power located *outside* or beyond the society or body politic *upon which* it is said to act.

Whilst these accounts of the Western impulse to genocide is treated as the product and outcome of an *artifice*, that is, of a conscious act of fabrication and design of the nation, the mass murders carried out in the East by nationals of Eastern European countries remain either untheorised, or, as will be seen, by recourse to claims of the “*naturalism*” that serves as the marker of “ethnic nationalism”.

In the latter case, unlike its Western counterpart, the presentation of such nationalism is *not* mediated through the bounded concept of “modernity” and the *praxis* of political emancipation. In the absence of these factors that played themselves out in the West, Eastern European nationalism and the antisemitism it brings in its wake, is presented in almost diametrically opposite terms; that is, in terms of a *continuity*, if not the *culmination*, of an *unbroken* national tradition that has been unaffected by any historical rupture and the consequent imposition of the artifice of State power inherent in such a breach. As Walter Lacquer has stated in a recent study of antisemitism,

It is not difficult to pinpoint chronologically the transition from traditional to modern antisemitism in Germany or perhaps in France, but it is quite impossible to do so in the East European context” [17; p. 5].

If, therefore, for the “good nations” of Europe, the nationalism that made the Holocaust and its attendant antisemitism possible is treated as a modernist *artifice* and as *extraneous* to and an *imposition upon* its populations, *Eastern Europe* antisemitism is presented in far more *naturalist* terms. If in the West, therefore, the *praxis* of genocidal antisemitism emerged in the confines of a bounded temporality within a history categorised by its *discontinuity*, in the East, the mass killings of Jews carried out in its territories under the auspices of the nazis, is presented (where it is discussed at all) in the manner of an undifferentiated trajectory of an indigenous and *organic* national, or, rather, *natural* history. It is, moreover, a history that is said to spill into the present day. As a consequence, East European antisemitism of both the past and the present, is presented less through an understanding and analysis of past and contemporary social and political factors and forces, and more as an expression of the East’s natural topography; its antisemitism as much a part of that region as its lakes and forests.

This naturalist view obviously expresses itself through the view that Eastern Europeans (as “a people”) have, from time immemorial, always shown hostility to Jews and that the arrival of the nazis merely provided the opportunity or excuse for such hatred to express itself without restraint. Thus, whereas in the West’s postmodern and post-national self-presentation of the Holocaust, a sharp line is to be drawn between “pre-modern” pogroms and “modern” or “industrialised” methods of killing (see below), no such distinction is said to be operative in the East. Nor, from this point of view is a line capable of being drawn between the past and the present,

The upsurge [of antisemitism that accompanied the breakup of the Soviet Union] did not come as a complete surprise; everywhere in this part of the world, ethnic tensions that had been suppressed under the dictatorships came to the fore once the pressure from above disappeared [17; p. 132].

If, therefore, genocidal antisemitism in the West was a product of a “pressure from above” brought about by an *artifice* of State power, in the East, it is seen as the product of a *natural* animosity from below and which the artifice of the Soviet state (i.e. Stalinism) was said to have dampened.

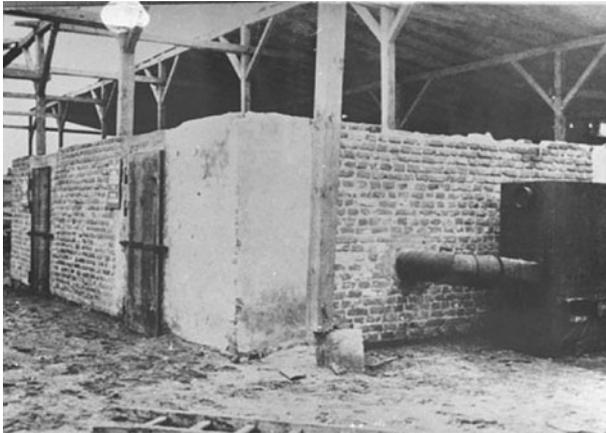
5 Method Over Substance

As paradoxical as it may seem, these notions of genocidal antisemitism as a modern or modernist artifice and as a “natural” phenomenon is reflected by—and reinforced through—the images of the *means* of mass killing; that is, the images of the *methods* through which genocidal antisemitism was put into practice.

At this point in the discussion, it is necessary to recall that the majority of Jews were killed outside the confines of the death camps and the “industrialised” method of killing practiced within them [12] The majority of East European Jews, those from Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and the Soviet Union were killed *prior* to the establishment of those camps. The extermination of these Jews, often, but not only, by shooting, tended to follow the advance of the Wehrmacht and took place as immediately as possible [9, 22]. It was these killing sprees that, under the supervision of the nazis, East European auxiliaries and ancillaries (mostly members of the Police) played their most explicitly murderous role.

However, within the critical accounts referred to above, which stress the modernist nature of genocidal antisemitism, special weight is placed upon the existence and methods of killing associated with the death camps (i.e. the “industrialised” methods of extermination centred around the gas chambers and crematoria). The limits of “the Holocaust” to these methods of mass murder is evidenced most clearly through its transliteration into the name of one camp, “Auschwitz” [1, 20] (erroneously presented as solely a death camp) into a concept thought to capture the “essence” and content of the mass killings themselves. From this modernist reading of the Holocaust, in an act of sublation, “Auschwitz” (and the gas chambers) *becomes*, or, rather *is*, the limit of the nazi extermination of Jews. As a consequence, a perfect symmetry is said to exist between the sealed world of the death camps, the means of killing adopted within them and the equally bounded era of the artifice of modernity that brought them into existence. (Although present in other works of this kind, this correlation is most clearly expressed in the recent work of Giorgio Agamben [4]).

Conversely, the presentation of the perception of the *naturalism* of the genocidal antisemitism carried on outside the camps in Eastern Europe is, again, reinforced by the methods—and extant images—adopted at that phase of the extermination. Here, emphasis is placed on the *physicality* involved in the killings; that of the seemingly primeval immediacy of one human being aiming a gun at another human being, pulling the trigger that results in the taking and bloody ending of a life.





6 The Absence of the (Western) Perpetrator and the Presence of the (Eastern) Perpetrator

What strikes one immediately about these images of both the gas chambers and the mass shootings is, in the former case, the complete *absence* of the figure of the perpetrator *and* victim; and, in the latter case, the *active* presence of the killer and killed. Equally at stake in this reading of these images—and highly pertinent to the distinction between “artifice” and “nature”—is the question and allocation of *responsibility*; personal, moral and legal that such absence and presence contains

within it. The presence of the perpetrator implies the *immediacy* of these forms of responsibility that cannot but be absent when such figures are absent. In other words, just as the question of responsibility is *problematized* in connection with the modernity of “the West”, so it is seemingly *simplified* in connection with the “naturalist” perception of “the East”.

The theoretical expression of these visual images (at least of the extant images of the modernist methods of murder) is, again, reflected in contemporary critical literature. Thus, for example, whilst Jean-Francois Lyotard speaks of “the SS” and locates them within the confines of the camp, the entire affair of the Holocaust is placed outside or beyond the field of representation [18]. Correspondingly, is Zygmunt Bauman’s emphasis on the role of the bureaucracy in the concentration, deportations and murder of Jews in the death camps. Bauman argues that the very essence of modern bureaucracy is the dissolution of responsibility for individual actions, a dissolution reinforced by the increasing and ever-expanding distance between individual act and collective consequence (a dissolution and distancing that is the mark of modernity as a whole). This emphasis on the *modern* administrative (or bureaucratic) nature of the Holocaust results in the very dissolution of responsibility that is implicated in the images of the gas chambers [7].

In the images of the killing fields of East Europe, many of them iconic within the visual history of the Holocaust, the *presence* of the perpetrator speaks precisely to the *lack* of modernist mediations that is said to mask the distance and responsibility between those committing the crime of genocide and those individuals being murdered in its name. Here, in other words, responsibility *appears* immediate and in keeping with the most basic of all laws of nature; that of cause and effect. However, if it is the case that the antisemitism of the perpetrator of “the East” is the expression of a natural phenomenon or natural disposition, it follows that the question of individual and personal responsibility is as problematic as it is in the modernist account of genocidal antisemitism as an artifice. One cannot be held responsible for acts and thoughts determined by one’s natural proclivities, by one’s “obedience” to the laws of one’s own nature.

It is as if in both the modernist and the naturalist accounts of genocidal antisemitism that, to quote Hannah Arendt, “if all is guilty, then none are” [5], and that the idea presented in both the images of the gas chamber and present equally in the images of the murders in the East really do reflect the idea of the Holocaust as is “a crime without a perpetrator” or, more exactly, as “a crime without a criminal”; an idea that is not only left unchallenged in both cases, but is actually underpinned and strengthened by them.

7 Conclusion

Looking over the recent literature emerging from Western Europe on the question of the East’s memory and acknowledgement of the Holocaust, one is struck by a dichotomy. On the one hand are those that argue that such acknowledgement is not only of primary importance, but also that, in making such demands, one runs the risk of reigniting hostility to Jews. On the other hand, there is the dogmatic demand

that the role of Eastern European nationals and nation-states acknowledge the past immediately and without hesitation. Implicit in this latter approach is that any hesitation will be taken as evidence of antisemitism.

It is to the first of these responses that Tony Judt speaks in the following comments. Noting the dilemma of “incompatible memories” between Western and Eastern Europe, the former having, finally, in and through the “new Europe” dealt with the past, whilst for the East such laying to rest is complicated by the traumas of the Soviet era. The *ressentiment* of the responses Judt reports, is clearly apparent,

[W]ith the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the resulting freedom to study and discuss the crimes and failures of communism, greater attention has been paid to the ordeal of Europe’s eastern half, at the hands of the Germans and Soviets alike. In this context, the Western European and American emphasis on Auschwitz and Jewish victims sometimes provokes an irritated response. In Poland and Romania, for example. I have been asked—by educated and cosmopolitan listeners—why Western intellectuals are so particularly sensitive to the mass murder of Jews. What of the millions of non-Jewish victims of Nazism and Stalinism? Why is the *Shoah* so very distinctive [16].

Here, what Judt sees as the necessary and important recognition of Eastern Europe’s role in the Holocaust is balanced against the fear that such calls for recognition are to be perceived as a “provocation” and as a means of masking the crimes committed against East Europeans in the years following 1945 (or, rather, 1948). Interestingly, this is precisely the same anxiety that Judt notes occurring in Western *Europe* prior to 1989 and the birth of the “new Europe”, which he identified as a “backlash”, but which he now believes has finally been laid to rest. In other words, for Judt, the mere mention of the Holocaust, runs the risk of bringing to the fore a latent antisemitism which, he implies, since it has not been “worked through” is still present, much as it was *at an earlier time* in the period before the inauguration of the “new Europe”.

If Judt’s reports implicitly acknowledge the presence of an underlying *ressentiment* to the subject of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, the alternative approach is, at the least, insensitive to the “context” noted by him; that is, of the multiple layers of history in the area. Nowhere is this insensitivity more in evidence than in the comments of Efraim Zuroff. Here, the dogmatic demand for acknowledgment is also clear,

[W]hereas all questions relating to the events of the *Shoah* were previously determined by Communist ideology and interests, these questions were reopened in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s and for the first time these countries could acknowledge the truth and act on it in a practical manner. The specific Holocaust-related issues these governments *had to address*.....were the following.....Acknowledgment of complicity by the local population in the murder of the Jews and an apology for those crimes; commemoration of the victims; prosecution of the perpetrators; documentation of the crimes; introduction of Holocaust education into the curriculum and the preparation of

appropriate educational materials restitution of communal and individual property [24].

Despite their difference of emphasis, both approaches are underpinned by a common view of East Europe; of an underlying and continual *natural* antisemitism that, as in the past, is merely waiting an opportunity to resurface in all its past terrors and horrors. It is this *naturalisation* of Eastern antisemitism that is implicit in boundaries separating the “bad nations” of “the East” from those of the “good nations” of “the West”.

To put the matter in other terms, whichever of these approaches are taken, one can detect underneath them, both jointly and severally, a certain “smugness” and “certainty” about the grounds *from which* such demands are being made. “*We have got our house in order. We have come to terms with the past. We have gone beyond the ethnic nationalism of the past. We have laid the ghost of the Holocaust and the body of antisemitism to rest. We are not the problem, indeed, we were never really the problem in the first place. We are the “good” Europeans.*”

However, with the recent resurgence of scholarship increasingly focussed on the “Eastern dimension” of the Holocaust, it is doubtful whether the distinctions are sustainable. Recent works by Timothy Snyder [23] as well as those by Christopher Browning cannot but continue to challenge the popular conception of East European antisemitism (historical and contemporary) as nothing more than the expression of a natural phenomenon. However, and as a perhaps less expected outcome, is that such renewed interest may serve to bring into question both the “certainties” that underpin the contemporary self-image of the “good nations” of Western Europe as well as the unreflective positivism that, in reaching similar conclusions, underpins recent critical thinking on the Holocaust discussed in this essay.

Writing in the conclusion to the article referred to at the start of the paper, Fine notes that,

Critical thought is liberating not because it produces any final code of conduct or definition of good and evil but because it questions everything and treats nothing as final [11].

On the question of the Holocaust, what began as critical theory’s inherent challenge to question both the fickleness of memory and to the petrification of “the natural”, appears, at least for the moment, to have run aground, albeit temporarily, on what Adorno and Horkheimer referred to as the “brute facts”. Perhaps now the time has come for critical theory to begin again to set sails and to attempt to charter less familiar and less certain waters.

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