

Modernity and the
Holocaust

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Introduction: Sociology after the Holocaust

Civilization now includes death camps and Muselmänner among its material and spiritual products

Richard Rubenstein and John Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*

There are two ways to belittle, misjudge, or shrug off the significance of the Holocaust for sociology as the theory of civilization, of modernity, of modern civilization.

One way is to present the Holocaust as something that happened to the Jews; as an event in *Jewish* history. This makes the Holocaust unique, comfortably uncharacteristic and sociologically inconsequential. The most common example of such a way is the presentation of the Holocaust as the culmination point of European-Christian antisemitism – in itself a unique phenomenon with nothing to compare it with in the large and dense inventory of ethnic or religious prejudices and aggressions. Among all other cases of collective antagonisms, antisemitism stands alone for its unprecedented systematicity, for its ideological intensity, for its supra-national and supra-territorial spread, for its unique mix of local and ecumenical sources and tributaries. In so far as it is defined as, so to speak, the continuation of antisemitism through other means, the Holocaust appears to be a 'one item set', a one-off episode, which perhaps sheds some light on the *pathology* of the society in which it occurred, but hardly adds anything to our understanding of this society's *normal* state. Less still does it call for any

significant revision of the orthodox understanding of the historical tendency of modernity, of the civilizing process, of the constitutive topics of sociological inquiry.

Another way – apparently pointing in an opposite direction, yet leading in practice to the same destination – is to present the Holocaust as an extreme case of a wide and familiar category of social phenomena; a category surely loathsome and repellent, yet one we can (and must) live with. We must live with it because of its resilience and ubiquity, but above all because modern society has been all along, is and will remain, an organization designed to roll it back, and perhaps even to stamp it out altogether. Thus the Holocaust is classified as another item (however prominent) in a wide class that embraces many 'similar' cases of conflict, or prejudice, or aggression. At worst, the Holocaust is referred to a primeval and culturally inextinguishable, 'natural' predisposition of the human species – Lorenz's instinctual aggression or Arthur Koestler's failure of the neo-cortex to control the ancient, emotion-ridden part of the brain.¹ As pre-social and immune to cultural manipulation, factors responsible for the Holocaust are effectively removed from the area of sociological interest. At best, the Holocaust is cast inside the most awesome and sinister – yet still theoretically assimilable category – of genocide; or else simply dissolved in the broad, all-too-familiar class of ethnic, cultural or racial oppression and persecution.²

Whichever of the two ways is taken, the effects are very much the same. The Holocaust is shunted into the familiar stream of history:

When viewed in this fashion, and accompanied with the proper citation of other historical horrors (the religious crusades, the slaughter of Albigensian heretics, the Turkish decimation of the Armenians, and even the British invention of concentration camps during the Boer War), it becomes all too convenient to see the Holocaust as 'unique' – but normal, after all.³

Or the Holocaust is traced back to the only-too-familiar record of the hundreds of years of ghettos, legal discrimination, pogroms and persecutions of Jews in Christian Europe – and so revealed as a uniquely horrifying, yet fully logical consequence of ethnic and religious hatred. One way or the other, the bomb is defused; no major revision of our social theory is really necessary; our visions of modernity, of its unrevealed yet all-too-present potential, its historical tendency, do not require another hard look, as the methods and concepts accumulated by sociology are fully adequate to handle this challenge – to 'explain it', to

'make sense of it', to understand. The overall result is theoretical complacency. Nothing, really, happened to justify another critique of the model of modern society that has served so well as the theoretical framework and the pragmatic legitimation of sociological practice.

Thus far, significant dissent with this complacent, self-congratulating attitude has been voiced mostly by historians and theologians. Little attention has been paid to these voices by the sociologists. When compared with the awesome amount of work accomplished by the historians, and the volume of soul-searching among both Christian and Jewish theologians, the contributions of professional sociologists to Holocaust studies seems marginal and negligible. Such sociological studies as have been completed so far show beyond reasonable doubt that *the Holocaust has more to say about the state of sociology than sociology in its present shape is able to add to our knowledge of the Holocaust*. This alarming fact has not yet been faced (much less responded to) by the sociologists.

The way the sociological profession perceives its task regarding the event called 'the Holocaust' has been perhaps most pertinently expressed by one of the profession's most eminent representatives, Everett C. Hughes:

The National Socialist Government of Germany carried out the most colossal piece of 'dirty work' in history on the Jews. The crucial problems concerning such an occurrence are (1) who are the people who actually carry out such work and (2) what are the circumstances in which other 'good' people allow them to do it? What we need is better knowledge of the signs of their rise to power and better ways of keeping them out of power.⁴

True to the well-established principles of sociological practice, Hughes defines the problem as one of disclosing the peculiar combination of psycho-social factors which could be sensibly connected (as the determinant) with peculiar behavioural tendencies displayed by the 'dirty work' perpetrators; of listing another set of factors which detract from the (expected, though not forthcoming) resistance to such tendencies on the part of other individuals; and of gaining in the result a certain amount of explanatory-predictive knowledge which in this rationally organized world of ours, ruled as it is by causal laws and statistical probabilities, will allow its holders to prevent the 'dirty' tendencies from coming into existence, from expressing themselves in actual behaviour and achieving their deleterious, 'dirty' effects. The latter task will be

presumably attained through the application of the same model of action that has made our world rationally organized, manipulable and 'controllable'. What we need is a better technology for the old – and in no way discredited – activity of social engineering.

In what has been so far the most notable among the distinctly sociological contributions to the study of the Holocaust, Helen Fein⁵ has faithfully followed Hughes's advice. She defined her task as that of spelling out a number of psychological, ideological and structural variables which most strongly correlate with percentages of Jewish victims or survivors inside various state-national entities of Nazi-dominated Europe. By all orthodox standards, Fein produced a most impressive piece of research. Properties of national communities, intensity of local antisemitism, degrees of Jewish acculturation and assimilation, the resulting cross-communal solidarity have all been carefully and correctly indexed, so that correlations may be properly computed and checked for their relevance. Some hypothetical connections are shown to be non-existent or at least statistically invalid; some other regularities are statistically confirmed (like the correlation between the absence of solidarity and the likelihood that 'people would become detached from moral constraints'). It is precisely because of the impeccable sociological skills of the author, and the competence with which they are put in operation, that the weaknesses of orthodox sociology have been inadvertently exposed in Fein's book. Without revising some of the essential yet tacit assumptions of sociological discourse, one cannot do anything other than what Fein has done; conceive of the Holocaust as a unique yet fully determined product of a particular concatenation of social and psychological factors, which led to a temporary suspension of the civilizational grip in which human behaviour is normally held. On such a view (implicitly if not explicitly) one thing that emerges from the experience of the Holocaust intact and unscathed is the humanizing and/or rationalizing (the two concepts are used synonymously) impact of social organization upon inhuman drives which rule the conduct of pre- or anti-social individuals. Whatever moral instinct is to be found in human conduct is socially produced. It dissolves once society malfunctions. 'In an anomic condition – free from social regulation – people may respond without regard to the possibility of injuring others.'⁶ By implication, the presence of effective social regulation makes such disregard unlikely. The thrust of social regulation – and thus of modern civilization, prominent as it is for pushing regulative ambitions to limits never heard of before – is the imposition

of moral constraints on otherwise rampant selfishness and inborn savagery of the animal in man. Having processed the facts of the Holocaust through the mill of that methodology which defines it as a scholarly discipline, orthodox sociology can only deliver a message bound more by its presuppositions than by 'the facts of the case': the message that the Holocaust was a failure, not a product, of modernity.

In another remarkable sociological study of the Holocaust, Nechama Tec attempted to explore the opposite side of the social spectrum; the rescuers – those people who did not allow the 'dirty work' to be perpetrated, who dedicated their lives to the suffering others in the world of universal selfishness; people who, in short, remained moral under immoral conditions. Loyal to the precepts of sociological wisdom, Tec tried hard to find the social determinants of what by all standards of the time was an aberrant behaviour. One by one, she put to the test all hypotheses that any respectable and knowledgeable sociologist would certainly include in the research project. She computed correlations between the readiness to help on the one hand, and various factors of class, educational, denominational, or political allegiance on the other – only to discover that there was none. In defiance of her own – and her sociologically trained readers' – expectations, Tec had to draw the only permissible conclusion: 'These rescuers acted in ways that were natural to them – spontaneously they were able to strike out against the horrors of their times.'⁷ In other words, the rescuers were willing to rescue because this was their nature. They came from all corners and sectors of 'social structure', thereby calling the bluff of there being 'social determinants' of moral behaviour. If anything, the contribution of such determinants expressed itself in their failure to extinguish the rescuers' urge to help others in their distress. Tec came closer than most sociologists to the discovery that the real point at issue is not; 'What can we, the sociologists, say about the Holocaust?', but, rather, 'What has the Holocaust to say about us, the sociologists, and our practice?'

While the necessity to ask this question seems both a most urgent and a most ignobly neglected part of the Holocaust legacy, its consequences must be carefully considered. It is only too easy to over-react to the apparent bankruptcy of established sociological visions. Once the hope to contain the Holocaust experience in the theoretical framework of malfunction (modernity incapable of suppressing the essentially alien factors of irrationality, civilizing pressures failing to subdue emotional and violent drives, socialization going awry and hence unable to produce the needed volume of moral motivations) has been dashed, one can be

easily tempted to try the 'obvious' exit from the theoretical impasse; to proclaim the Holocaust a 'paradigm' of modern civilization, its 'natural', 'normal' (who knows – perhaps also *common*) product, its 'historical tendency'. In this version, the Holocaust would be promoted to the status of *truth* of modernity (rather than recognized as a *possibility* that modernity contains) – the truth only superficially concealed by the ideological formula imposed by those who benefit from the 'big lie'. In a perverse fashion, this view (we shall deal with it in more detail in the fourth chapter) having allegedly elevated the historical and theoretical significance of the Holocaust, can only belittle its importance, as the horrors of genocide will have become virtually indistinguishable from other sufferings that modern society does undoubtedly generate daily – and in abundance.

The Holocaust as the test of modernity

A few years ago a journalist of *Le Monde* interviewed a sample of former hijack victims. One of the most interesting things he found was an abnormally high incidence of divorce among the couples who went jointly through the agony of hostage experience. Intrigued, he probed the divorcees for the reasons for their decision. Most interviewees told him that they had never contemplated a divorce before the hijack. During the horrifying episode, however, 'their eyes opened', and 'they saw their partners in a new light'. Ordinary good husbands, 'proved to be' selfish creatures, caring only for their own stomachs; daring businessmen displayed disgusting cowardice; resourceful 'men of the world' fell to pieces and did little except bemoaning their imminent perdition. The journalist asked himself a question; which of the two incarnations each of these Januses was clearly capable of was the true face, and which was the mask? He concluded that the question was wrongly put. Neither was 'truer' than the other. Both were possibilities that the character of the victims contained all along – they simply surfaced at different times and in different circumstances. The 'good' face seemed normal only because normal conditions favoured it above the other. Yet the other was always present, though normally invisible. The most fascinating aspect of this finding was, however, that were it not for the hijackers' venture, the 'other face' would probably have remained hidden forever. The partners would have continued to enjoy their marriage, unaware of the unprepossessing qualities some unexpected and extra-

ordinary circumstances might still uncover in persons they seemed to know, liking what they knew.

The paragraph we quoted before from Nechama Tec's study ends with the following observation; 'were it not for the Holocaust, most of these helpers might have continued on their independent paths, some pursuing charitable actions, some leading simple, unobtrusive lives. They were dormant heroes, often indistinguishable from those around them.' One of the most powerfully (and convincingly) argued conclusions of the study was the impossibility of 'spotting in advance' the signs, or symptoms, or indicators, of individual readiness for sacrifice, or of cowardice in the face of adversity; that is, to decide, outside the context that calls them into being or just 'wakes them up', the probability of their later manifestation.

John R. Roth brings the same issue of potentiality versus reality (the first being a yet-undisclosed mode of the second, and the second being an already-realized – and thus empirically accessible – mode of the first) in a direct contact with our problem:

Had Nazi Power prevailed, authority to determine what ought to be would have found that no natural laws were broken and no crimes against God and humanity were committed in the Holocaust. It would have been a question, though, whether the slave labour operations should continue, expand, or go out of business. Those decisions would have been made on rational grounds.⁸

The unspoken terror permeating our collective memory of the Holocaust (and more than contingently related to the overwhelming desire not to look the memory in its face) is the gnawing suspicion that the Holocaust could be more than an aberration, more than a deviation from an otherwise straight path of progress, more than a cancerous growth on the otherwise healthy body of the civilized society; that, in short, the Holocaust was not an antithesis of modern civilization and everything (or so we like to think) it stands for. We suspect (even if we refuse to admit it) that the Holocaust could merely have uncovered another face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar, face we so admire. And that the two faces are perfectly comfortably attached to the same body. What we perhaps fear most, is that each of the two faces can no more exist without the other than can the two sides of a coin.

Often we stop just at the threshold of the awesome truth. And so

Henry Feingold insists that the episode of the Holocaust was indeed a new development in a long, and on the whole blameless, history of modern society; a development we had no way to expect and predict, like an appearance of a new malign strain of an allegedly tamed virus:

The Final Solution marked the juncture where the European industrial system went awry; instead of enhancing life, which was the original hope of the Enlightenment, it began to consume itself. It was by dint of that industrial system and the ethos attached to it that Europe was able to dominate the world.

As if the skills needed and deployed in the service of world domination were qualitatively different from those which secured the effectiveness of the Final Solution. And yet Feingold is staring the truth in the face:

[Auschwitz] was also a mundane extension of the modern factory system. Rather than producing goods, the raw material was human beings and the end-product was death, so many units per day marked carefully on the manager's production charts. The chimneys, the very symbol of the modern factory system, poured forth acrid smoke produced by burning human flesh. The brilliantly organized railroad grid of modern Europe carried a new kind of raw material to the factories. It did so in the same manner as with other cargo. In the gas chambers the victims inhaled noxious gas generated by prussic acid pellets, which were produced by the advanced chemical industry of Germany. Engineers designed the crematoria; managers designed the system of bureaucracy that worked with a zest and efficiency more backward nations would envy. Even the overall plan itself was a reflection of the modern scientific spirit gone awry. What we witnessed was nothing less than a massive scheme of social engineering ...⁹

The truth is that every 'ingredient' of the Holocaust – all those many things that rendered it possible – was normal; 'normal' not in the sense of the familiar, of one more specimen in a large class of phenomena long ago described in full, explained and accommodated (on the contrary, the experience of the Holocaust was new and unfamiliar), but in the sense of being fully in keeping with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world – and of the proper ways to pursue human happiness together with a perfect society. In the words of Stillman and Pfaff,

There is more than a wholly fortuitous connection between the applied technology of the mass production line, with its vision of universal material abundance, and the applied technology of the concentration camp, with its vision of a profusion of death. We may wish to deny the connection, but Buchenwald was of our West as much as Detroit's River Rouge – we cannot deny Buchenwald as a casual aberration of a Western world essentially sane.¹⁰

Let us also recall the conclusion Raul Hilberg has reached at the end of his unsurpassed, magisterial study of the Holocaust's accomplishment: 'The machinery of destruction, then, was structurally no different from organized German society as a whole. The machinery of destruction *was* the organized community in one of its special roles.'¹¹

Richard L. Rubenstein has drawn what seems to me the ultimate lesson of the Holocaust. 'It bears,' he wrote, 'witness to the *advance of civilization*.' It was an advance, let us add, in a double sense. In the Final Solution, the industrial potential and technological know-how boasted by our civilization has scaled new heights in coping successfully with a task of unprecedented magnitude. And in the same Final Solution our society has disclosed to us its heretofore unsuspected capacity. Taught to respect and admire technical efficiency and good design, we cannot but admit that, in the praise of material progress which our civilization has brought, we have sorely underestimated its true potential.

The world of the death camps and the society it engenders reveals the progressively intensifying night side of Judeo-Christian civilization. Civilization means slavery, wars, exploitation, and death camps. It also means medical hygiene, elevated religious ideas, beautiful art, and exquisite music. It is an error to imagine that civilization and savage cruelty are antithesis ... In our times the cruelties, like most other aspects of our world, have become far more effectively administered than ever before. They have not and will not cease to exist. Both creation and destruction are inseparable aspects of what we call civilization.¹²

Hilberg is a historian, Rubenstein is a theologian. I have keenly searched the works of sociologists for statements expressing similar awareness of the urgency of the task posited by the Holocaust; for evidence that the Holocaust presents, among other things, a challenge to sociology as a profession and a body of academic knowledge. When measured against the work done by historians or theologians, the bulk of

academic sociology looks more like a collective exercise in forgetting and eye-closing. By and large, the lessons of the Holocaust have left little trace on sociological common sense, which includes among many others such articles of faith as the benefits of reason's rule over the emotions, the superiority of rationality over (what else?) irrational action, or the endemic clash between the demands of efficiency and the moral leanings with which 'personal relations' are so hopelessly infused. However loud and poignant, voices of the protest against this faith have not yet penetrated the walls of the sociological establishment.

I do not know of many occasions on which sociologists, *qua* sociologists, confronted publicly the evidence of the Holocaust. One such occasion (though on a small scale) was offered by the symposium on *Western Society after the Holocaust*, convened in 1978 by the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Social Problems.¹³ During the symposium, Richard L. Rubenstein presented an imaginative, though perhaps over-emotional attempt to re-read, in the light of the Holocaust experience, some of the best-known of Weber's diagnoses of the tendencies of modern society. Rubenstein wished to find out whether the things we know about, but of which Weber was naturally unaware, could have been anticipated (by Weber himself and his readers), at least as a possibility, from what Weber knew, perceived or theorized about. He thought he had found a positive answer to this question, or at least so he suggested: that in Weber's exposition of modern bureaucracy, rational spirit, principle of efficiency, scientific mentality, relegation of values to the realm of subjectivity etc. no mechanism was recorded that was capable of excluding the possibility of Nazi excesses; that, moreover, there was nothing in Weber's ideal types that would necessitate the description of the activities of the Nazi state as *excesses*. For example, 'no horror perpetrated by the German medical profession or German technocrats was inconsistent with the view that values are inherently subjective and that science is intrinsically instrumental and value-free'. Guenther Roth, the eminent Weberian scholar and a sociologist of high and deserved repute, did not try to hide his displeasure: 'My disagreement with Professor Rubenstein is total. There is just no sentence in his presentation that I can accept.' Probably incensed by the possible harm to Weber's memory (a harm lurking, as it were, in the very idea of 'anticipation'), Guenther Roth reminded the gathering that Weber was a liberal, loved the constitution and approved of the working class's voting rights (and thus, presumably, could not be recalled in conjunction with a thing so abominable as the Holocaust). He refrained,

however, from confronting the substance of Rubenstein's suggestion. By the same token, he deprived himself of the possibility of seriously considering the 'unanticipated consequences' of the growing rule of reason which Weber identified as the central attribute of modernity and to which analysis he made a most seminal contribution. He did not use the occasion to face point-blank the 'other side' of the perceptive visions bequeathed by the classic of the sociological tradition; nor the opportunity to ponder whether our sad knowledge, unavailable to the classics, may enable us to find out in their insights things the full consequences of which they themselves could not be, except dimly, aware.

In all probability, Guenther Roth is not the only sociologist who would rally to the defence of the hallowed truths of our joint tradition at the expense of the adverse evidence; it is just that most other sociologists have not been forced to do so in such an outspoken way. By and large, we need not bother with the challenge of the Holocaust in our daily professional practice. As a profession, we have succeeded in all but forgetting it, or shelving it away into the 'specialist interests' area, from where it stands no chance of reaching the mainstream of the discipline. If at all discussed in sociological texts, the Holocaust is at best offered as a sad example of what an untamed innate human aggressiveness may do, and then used as a pretext to exhort the virtues of taming it through an increase in the civilizing pressure and another flurry of expert problem-solving. At worst, it is remembered as a private experience of the Jews, as a matter between the Jews and their haters (a 'privatization' to which many spokesmen of the State of Israel, guided by other than eschatological concerns, has contributed more than a minor share).¹⁴

This state of affairs is worrying not only, and not at all primarily, for the professional reasons - however detrimental it may be for the cognitive powers and societal relevance of sociology. What makes this situation much more disturbing is the awareness that if 'it could happen on such a massive scale elsewhere, then it can happen anywhere; it is all within the range of human possibility, and like it or not, Auschwitz expands the universe of consciousness no less than landing on the moon'.¹⁵ The anxiety can hardly abate in view of the fact that none of the societal conditions that made Auschwitz possible has truly disappeared, and no effective measures have been undertaken to prevent such possibilities and principles from generating Auschwitz-like catastrophes; as Leo Kuper has recently found out, 'the sovereign territorial state claims, as an integral part of its sovereignty, the right to commit genocide, or engage in genocidal massacres, against people under its rule,

and ... the UN, for all practical purposes, defends this right.¹⁶

One posthumous service the Holocaust can render is to provide an insight into the otherwise unnoticed 'other aspects' of the societal principles enshrined by modern history. I propose that the experience of the Holocaust, now thoroughly researched by the historians, should be looked upon as, so to speak, a sociological 'laboratory'. The Holocaust has exposed and examined such attributes of our society as are not revealed, and hence are not empirically accessible, in 'non-laboratory' conditions. In other words, *I propose to treat the Holocaust as a rare, yet significant and reliable, test of the hidden possibilities of modern society.*

4. The meaning of the civilizing process

The etiological myth deeply entrenched in the self-consciousness of our Western society is the morally elevating story of humanity emerging from pre-social barbarity. This myth lent stimulus and popularity to, and in turn was given a learned and sophisticated support by, quite a few influential sociological theories and historical narratives; the link most recently illustrated by the burst of prominence and overnight success of the Elias's presentation of the 'civilizing process'. Contrary opinions of contemporary social theorists (see, for instance, the thorough analyses of multifarious civilizing processes: historical and comparative by Michael Mann, synthetic and theoretical by Anthony Giddens), which emphasize the growth of military violence and untrammelled use of coercion as the most crucial attributes of the emergence and entrenchment of great civilizations, have a long way to go before they succeed in displacing the etiological myth from public consciousness, or even from the diffuse folklore of the profession. By and large, lay opinion resents all challenge to the myth. Its resistance is backed, moreover, by a broad coalition of respectable learned opinions which contains such powerful authorities as the 'Whig view' of history as the victorious struggle between reason and superstition; Weber's vision of rationalization as a movement toward achieving more for less effort; psychoanalytical promise to debunk, prise off and tame the animal in man; Marx's grand prophecy of life and history coming under full control of the human species once it is freed from the presently debilitating parochialities; Elias's portrayal of recent history as that of eliminating violence from daily life; and, above all, the chorus of experts who assure us that human problems are matters of wrong policies, and that right policies mean elimination of problems.

Behind the alliance stands fast the modern 'gardening' state, viewing the society it rules as an object of designing, cultivating and weed-poisoning.

In view of this myth, long ago ossified into the common sense of our era, the Holocaust can only be understood as the failure of civilization (i.e. of human purposive, reason-guided activity) to contain the morbid natural predilections of whatever has been left of nature in man. Obviously, the Hobbesian world has not been fully chained, the Hobbesian problem has not been fully resolved. In other words, we do not have as yet enough civilization. The unfinished civilizing process is yet to be brought to its conclusion. If the lesson of mass murder does teach us anything it is that the prevention of similar hiccups of barbarism evidently requires still more civilizing efforts. There is nothing in this lesson to cast doubt on the future effectiveness of such efforts and their ultimate results. We certainly move in the right direction; perhaps we do not move fast enough.

As its full picture emerges from historical research, so does an alternative, and possible more credible, interpretation of the Holocaust as an event which disclosed the weakness and fragility of human nature (of the abhorrence of murder, disinclination to violence, fear of guilty conscience and of responsibility for immoral behaviour) when confronted with the matter-of-fact efficiency of the most cherished among the products of civilization; its technology, its rational criteria of choice, its tendency to subordinate thought and action to the pragmatics of economy and effectiveness. The Hobbesian world of the Holocaust did not surface from its too-shallow grave, resurrected by the tumult of irrational emotions. It arrived (in a formidable shape Hobbes would certainly disown) in a factory-produced vehicle, wielding weapons only the most advanced science could supply, and following an itinerary designed by scientifically managed organization. Modern civilization was not the Holocaust's *sufficient* condition; it was, however, most certainly its *necessary* condition. Without it, the Holocaust would be unthinkable. It was the rational world of modern civilization that made the Holocaust thinkable. 'The Nazi mass murder of the European Jewry was not only the technological achievement of an industrial society, but also the organizational achievement of a bureaucratic society.'¹⁷ Just consider what was needed to make the Holocaust unique among the many mass murders which marked the historical advance of the human species.

The civil service infused the other hierarchies with its sure-footed planning and bureaucratic thoroughness. From the army the

machinery of destruction acquired its military precision, discipline, and callousness. Industry's influence was felt in the great emphasis upon accounting, penny-saving, and salvage, as well as in factory-like efficiency of the killing centres. Finally, the party contributed to the entire apparatus an 'idealism', a sense of 'mission', and a notion of history-making ...

It was indeed the organized society in one of special roles. Though engaged in mass murder on a gigantic scale, this vast bureaucratic apparatus showed concern for correct bureaucratic procedure, for the niceties of precise definition, for the minutiae of bureaucratic regulation, and the compliance with the law.¹⁸

The department in the SS headquarters in charge of the destruction of European Jews was officially designated as the Section of Administration and Economy. This was only partly a lie; only in part can it be explained by reference to the notorious 'speech rules', designed to mislead both chance observers and the less resolute among the perpetrators. To a degree much too high for comfort, the designation faithfully reflected the organizational meaning of activity. Except for the moral repulsiveness of its goal (or, to be precise, the gigantic scale of the moral odium), the activity did not differ in any formal sense (the only sense that can be expressed in the language of bureaucracy) from all other organized activities designed, monitored and supervised by 'ordinary' administrative and economic sections. Like all other activities amenable to bureaucratic rationalization, it fits well the sober description of modern administration offered by Max Weber:

Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs – these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration ... Bureaucratization offers above all the optimum possibility for carrying through the principle of specializing administrative functions according to purely objective considerations ... The 'objective' discharge of business primarily means a discharge of business according to *calculable rules* and 'without regard for persons.'¹⁹

There is nothing in this description that warrants questioning the bureaucratic definition of the Holocaust as either a simply travesty of truth or a manifestation of a particularly monstrous form of cynicism.

And yet the Holocaust is so crucial to our understanding of the

modern bureaucratic mode of rationalization not only, and not primarily, because it reminds us (as if we need such a reminder) just how formal and ethically blind is the bureaucratic pursuit of efficiency. Its significance is not fully expressed either once we realize to what extent mass murder on an unprecedented scale depended on the availability of well-developed and firmly entrenched skills and habits of meticulous and precise division of labour, of maintaining a smooth flow of command and information, or of impersonal, well-synchronized co-ordination of autonomous yet complementary actions: on those skills and habits, in short, which best grow and thrive in the atmosphere of the office. The light shed by the Holocaust on our knowledge of bureaucratic rationality is at its most dazzling once we realize the extent to which *the very idea of the Endlösung was an outcome of the bureaucratic culture.*

We owe to Karl Schleuner²⁰ the concept of the twisted road to physical extermination of European Jewry: a road which was neither conceived in a single vision of a mad monster, nor was a considered choice made at the start of the 'problem-solving process' by the ideologically motivated leaders. It did, rather, emerge inch by inch, pointing at each stage to a different destination, shifting in response to ever-new crises, and pressed forward with a 'we will cross that bridge once we come to it' philosophy. Schleuner's concept summarizes best the findings of the 'functionalist' school in the historiography of the Holocaust (which in recent years rapidly gains strength at the expense of the 'intentionalists', who in turn find it increasingly difficult to defend the once dominant single-cause explanation of the Holocaust – that is, a vision that ascribes to the genocide a motivational logic and a consistency it never possessed).

According to the functionalists' findings, 'Hitler set the objective of Nazism: "to get rid of the Jews, and above all to make the territory of the Reich *judenfrei*, i.e., clear of Jews" – but without specifying how this was to be achieved.'²¹ Once the objective had been set, everything went on exactly as Weber, with his usual clarity, spelled out: "The "political master" finds himself in the position of the "dilettante" who stands opposite the "expert", facing the trained official who stands within the management of administration.'²² The objective had to be implemented; how this was to be done depended on the circumstances, always judged by the 'experts' from the point of view of feasibility and the costs of alternative opportunities of action. And so the emigration of German Jews was chosen first as the practical solution to Hitler's objective; it would result in a *judenfrei* Germany, were other countries more

hospitable to Jewish refugees. When Austria was annexed, Eichmann earned his first accolade for expediting and streamlining the mass emigration of Austrian Jewry. But then the territory under Nazi rule began to swell. At first the Nazi bureaucracy saw the conquest and appropriation of quasi-colonial territories as the dreamt-of opportunity to fulfil the *Führer's* command in full: *Generalgouvernement* seemed to provide the sought-after dumping ground for the Jewry still inhabiting lands of Germany proper, destined for racial purity. A separate reserve for the future 'Jewish principality' was designated around Nisko, in what was, before the conquest, central Poland. To this, however, German bureaucracy saddled with the management of the former Polish territories objected: it had already enough trouble with policing its own local Jewry. And so Eichmann spent a full year working on the Madagascar project: with France defeated, her far-away colony could be transformed into the Jewish principality that failed to materialize in Europe. The Madagascar project, however, proved to be similarly ill-fated, given the enormous distance, the volume of necessary ship-space, and the British navy presence on the high seas. In the meantime the size of the conquered territory, and so the number of Jews under German jurisdiction continued to grow. A Nazi-dominated Europe (rather than simply the 'reunited *Reich*') seemed a more and more tangible prospect. Gradually yet relentlessly, the thousand-year *Reich* took up, ever more distinctly, the shape of a German-ruled Europe. Under the circumstances, the goal of a *judenfrei* Germany could not but follow the process. Almost imperceptibly, step by step, it expanded into the objective of *judenfrei* Europe. Ambitions on such a scale could not be satisfied by a Madagascar, however accessible (though according to Eberhard Jäckel there is some evidence that still in July 1941, when Hitler expected the USSR to be defeated in a matter of weeks, the vast expanses of Russia beyond the Archangel–Astrakhan line were seen as the ultimate dumping ground for all Jews inhabiting Europe unified under German rule). With the downfall of Russia reluctant to materialize, and the alternative solutions unable to keep pace with the fast-growing problem, Himmler ordered on 1 October 1941 the final stop to all further Jewish emigration. The task of 'getting rid of the Jews' had been found another, more effective means of implementation: physical extermination was chosen as the most feasible and effective means to the original, and newly expanded, end. The rest was the matter of co-operation between various departments of state bureaucracy; of careful planning, designing proper technology and technical equipment,

budgeting, calculating and mobilizing necessary resources: indeed, the matter of dull bureaucratic routine.

The most shattering of lessons deriving from the analysis of the 'twisted road to Auschwitz' is that – in the last resort – *the choice of physical extermination as the right means to the task of Entfernung was a product of routine bureaucratic procedures*: means–ends calculus, budget balancing, universal rule application. To make the point sharper still – the choice was an effect of the earnest effort to find rational solutions to successive 'problems', as they arose in the changing circumstances. It was also affected by the widely described bureaucratic tendency to goal-displacement – an affliction as normal in all bureaucracies as their routines. The very presence of functionaries charged with their specific tasks led to further initiatives and a continuous expansion of original purposes. Once again, expertise demonstrated its self-propelling capacity, its proclivity to expand and enrich the target which supplied its *raison d'être*.

The mere existence of a corpus of Jewish experts created a certain bureaucratic momentum behind Nazi Jewish policy. Even when deportations and mass murder were already under way, decrees appeared in 1942 prohibiting German Jews from having pets, getting their hair cut by Aryan barbers, or receiving the Reich sport badge! It did not require orders from above, merely the existence of the job itself, to ensure that the Jewish experts kept up the flow of discriminating measures.²³

At no point of its long and tortuous execution did the Holocaust come in conflict with the principles of rationality. The 'Final Solution' did not clash at any stage with the rational pursuit of efficient, optimal goal-implementation. On the contrary, *it arose out of a genuinely rational concern, and it was generated by bureaucracy true to its form and purpose*. We know of many massacres, pogroms, mass murders, indeed instances not far removed from genocide, that have been perpetrated without modern bureaucracy, the skills and technologies it commands, the scientific principles of its internal management. The Holocaust, however, was clearly unthinkable without such bureaucracy. The Holocaust was not an irrational outflow of the not-yet-fully-eradicated residues of pre-modern barbarity. It was a legitimate resident in the house of modernity; indeed, one who would not be at home in any other house.

This is not to suggest that the incidence of the Holocaust was *determined* by modern bureaucracy or the culture of instrumental

rationality it epitomizes; much less still, that modern bureaucracy *must* result in Holocaust-style phenomena. I do suggest, however, that the rules of instrumental rationality are singularly incapable of preventing such phenomena; that there is nothing in those rules which disqualifies the Holocaust-style methods of 'social-engineering' as improper or, indeed, the actions they served as irrational. I suggest, further, that the bureaucratic culture which prompts us to view society as an object of administration, as a collection of so many 'problems' to be solved, as 'nature' to be 'controlled', 'mastered' and 'improved' or 'remade', as a legitimate target for 'social engineering', and in general a garden to be designed and kept in the planned shape by force (the gardening posture divides vegetation into 'cultured plants' to be taken care of, and weeds to be exterminated), was the very atmosphere in which the idea of the Holocaust could be conceived, slowly yet consistently developed, and brought to its conclusion. And I also suggest that it was the spirit of instrumental rationality, and its modern, bureaucratic form of institutionalization, which had made the Holocaust-style solutions not only possible, but eminently 'reasonable' – and increased the probability of their choice. This increase in probability is more than fortuitously related to the ability of modern bureaucracy to co-ordinate the action of great number of moral individuals in the pursuit of any, also immoral, ends.

Social production of moral indifference

Dr Servatius, Eichmann's counsel in Jerusalem, pointedly summarized his line of defence: Eichmann committed acts for which one is decorated if one wins, and goes to the gallows if one loses. The obvious message of this statement – certainly one of the most poignant of the century not at all short of striking ideas – is trivial; might does make right. Yet there is also another message, not so evident, though no less cynical and much more alarming; Eichmann did nothing essentially different from things done by those on the side of the winners. Actions have no intrinsic moral value. Neither are they immanently immoral. Moral evaluation is something external to the action itself, decided by criteria other than those that guide and shape the action itself.

What is so alarming in the message of Dr Servatius is that – once detached from the circumstances under which it was uttered, and considered in depersonalized universal terms – it does not differ significantly from what sociology has been saying all along; or indeed,

from the seldom-questioned, and still less frequently assailed, common sense of our modern, rational society. Dr Servatius's statement is shocking precisely for this reason. It brings home a truth that on the whole we prefer to leave unspoken: that as long as the commonsensical truth in question is accepted as evident, there is no sociologically legitimate way of excluding Eichmann's case from its application.

It is common knowledge by now that the initial attempts to interpret the Holocaust as an outrage committed by born criminals, sadists, madmen, social miscreants or otherwise morally defective individuals failed to find any confirmation in the facts of the case. Their refutation by historical research is today all but final. The present drift of historical thinking has been aptly summed up by Kren and Rappoport:

By conventional clinical criteria no more than 10 per cent of the SS could be considered 'abnormal'. This observation fits the general trend of testimony by survivors indicating that in most of the camps, there was usually one, or at most a few, SS men known for their intense outbursts of sadistic cruelty. The others were not always decent persons, but their behaviour was at least considered comprehensible by the prisoners ...

Our judgement is that the overwhelming majority of SS men, leaders as well as rank and file, would have easily passed all the psychiatric tests ordinarily given to American army recruits or Kansas City policemen.²⁴

That most of the perpetrators of the genocide were normal people, who will freely flow through any known psychiatric sieve, however dense, is morally disturbing. It is also theoretically puzzling, particularly when seen conjointly with the 'normality' of those organizational structures that co-ordinated the actions of such normal individuals into an enterprise of the genocide. We know already that the institutions responsible for the Holocaust, even if found criminal, were in no legitimate sociological sense pathological or abnormal. Now we see that the people whose actions they institutionalized did not deviate either from established standards of normality. There is little choice left, therefore, but to look again, with eyes sharpened by our new knowledge, at the allegedly fully understood, normal patterns of modern rational action. It is in these patterns that we can hope to uncover the possibility so dramatically revealed in the times of the Holocaust.

In the famous phrase of Hannah Arendt, the most difficult problem that the initiators of the *Endlösung* encountered (and solved with

astounding success, as it were) was 'how to overcome . . . the animal pity by which all normal men are affected in the presence of physical suffering'.²⁵ We know that people enlisted into the organizations most directly involved in the business of mass murder were neither abnormally sadistic nor abnormally fanatical. We can assume that they shared in the well-nigh instinctual human aversion to the affliction of physical suffering, and even more universal inhibition against taking life. We know even that when, for instance, members of the *Einsatzgruppen* and other units similarly close to the scene of actual killings were enlisted, special care was taken to weed out – bar or discharge – all particularly keen, emotionally charged, ideologically over-zealous individuals. We know that individual initiatives were discouraged, and much effort was made to keep the whole task in a businesslike and strictly impersonal framework. Personal gains, and personal motives in general, were censured and penalized. Killings induced by desire or pleasure, unlike those following orders and perpetrated in an organized fashion, could lead (at least in principle) to trial and conviction, like ordinary murder or manslaughter. On more than one occasion Himmler expressed deep, and in all likelihood genuine, concern with maintaining the mental sanity and upholding the moral standards of his many subordinates engaged daily in inhuman activity; he also expressed pride that, in his belief, both sanity and morality emerged unscathed from the test. To quote Arendt again, 'by its "objectivity" (*Sachlichkeit*), the SS dissociated itself from such "emotional" types as Streicher, that "unrealistic fool" and also from certain "Teutonic-Germanic Party bigwigs who behaved as though they were clad in horns and pelts"'.²⁶ The SS leaders counted (rightly, it would appear) on organizational routine, not on individual zeal; on discipline, not ideological dedication. Loyalty to the gory task was to be – and was indeed – a derivative of loyalty to the organization.

The 'overcoming of animal pity' could not be sought and attained through release of other, base animal instincts; the latter would be in all probability dysfunctional regarding the organizational capacity to act; a multitude of vengeful and murderous individuals would not match the effectiveness of a small, yet disciplined and strictly co-ordinated bureaucracy. And then it was not at all clear whether the killing instincts can be relied on to surface in all those thousands of ordinary clerks and professionals, who, because of the sheer scale of the enterprise, must have been involved at various stages of the operation. In Hilberg's words,

The German perpetrator was not a special kind of German . . . We know that the very nature of administrative planning, of the jurisdictional structure and of the budgetary system precluded the special selection and special training of personnel. Any member of the Order Police could be a guard at a ghetto or on a train. Every lawyer in the Reich Security Main Office was presumed to be suitable for leadership in the mobile killing units; every finance expert to the Economic-Administrative Main Office was considered a natural choice for service in a death camp. In other words, all necessary operations were accomplished with whatever personnel were at hand.²⁷

And so, how were these ordinary Germans transformed into the German perpetrators of mass crime? In the opinion of Herbert C. Kelman,²⁸ moral inhibitions against violent atrocities tend to be eroded once three conditions are met, singly or together; the violence is *authorized* (by official orders coming from the legally entitled quarters), actions are *routinized* (by rule-governed practices and exact specification of roles), and the victims of the violence are *dehumanized* (by ideological definitions and indoctrinations). With the third condition we shall deal separately. The first two, however, sound remarkably familiar. They have been spelled out repeatedly in those principles of rational action that have been given universal application by the most representative institutions of modern society.

The first principle most obviously relevant to our query is that of organizational discipline; more precisely, the demand to obey commands of the superiors to the exclusion of all other stimuli for action, to put the devotion to the welfare of the organization, as defined in the commands of the superiors, above all other devotions and commitments. Among these other, 'external' influences, interfering with the spirit of dedication and hence marked for suppression and extinction, personal views and preferences are the most prominent. The ideal of discipline points towards total identification with the organization – which, in its turn, cannot but mean readiness to obliterate one's own separate identity and sacrifice one's own interests (by definition, such interests as do not overlap with the task of the organization). In organizational ideology, readiness for such an extreme kind of self-sacrifice is articulated as a moral virtue; indeed, as the moral virtue destined to put paid to all other moral demands. The selfless observance of that moral virtue is then represented, in Weber's famous words, as the honour of the civil

servant; 'The honour of the civil servant is vested in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of superior authorities, exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction. This holds even if the order seems wrong to him and if, despite the civil servant's remonstrances, the authority insists on the order'. This kind of behaviour means, for a civil servant, 'moral discipline and self-denial in the highest sense'.²⁹ Through honour, discipline is substituted for moral responsibility. The delegitimation of all but inner-organizational rules as the source and guarantee of propriety, and thus denial of the authority of private conscience, become now the highest moral virtue. The discomfort that the practising of such virtues may cause on occasion, is counterbalanced by the superior's insistence that he and he alone bears the responsibility for his subordinates' actions (as long, of course, as they conform to his command). Weber completed his description of the civil servant's honour by emphasizing strongly the 'exclusive personal responsibility' of the leader, 'a responsibility he cannot and must not reject or transfer'. When pressed to explain, during the Nuremberg trial, why he did not resign from the command of the *Einsatzgruppe* of whose actions he, as a person, disapproved, Ohlendorf invoked precisely this sense of responsibility: were he to expose the deeds of his unit in order to obtain release from duties he said he resented, he would have let his men be 'wrongly accused'. Obviously, Ohlendorf expected that the same paternalistic responsibility he observed towards 'his men' would be practised by his own superiors towards himself; this absolved him from worry about the moral evaluation of his actions – a worry he could safely leave to those who commanded him to act. 'I do not think I am in a position to judge whether his measures ... were moral or immoral ... I surrender my moral conscience to the fact I was a soldier, and therefore a cog in a relatively low position of a great machine.'³⁰

If Midas's touch transformed everything into gold, SS administration transformed everything which had come into its orbit – including its victims – into an integral part of the chain of command, an area subject to the strictly disciplinary rules and freed from moral judgement. The genocide was a composite process; as Hilberg observed, it included things done by the Germans, and things done – on German orders, yet often with dedication verging on self-abandonment – by their Jewish victims. This is the technical superiority of a purposefully designed, rationally organized mass murder over riotous outbursts of orgy killing. Co-operation of the victims with the perpetrators of a pogrom is

inconceivable. The victims' co-operation with the bureaucrats of the SS was part of the design: indeed, it was a crucial condition of its success. 'A large component of the entire process depended on Jewish participation – the simple acts of individuals as well as organized activity in councils ... German supervisors turned to Jewish councils for information, money, labour, or police, and the councils provided them with these means every day of the week.' This astonishing effect of successfully extending the rules of bureaucratic conduct, complete with the delegitimation of alternative loyalties and moral motives in general to encompass the intended victims of bureaucracy, and thereby deploying their skills and labour in the implementation of the task of their destruction, was achieved (much as in the mundane activity of every other, sinister or benign, bureaucracy) in a twofold way. First, the external setting of the ghetto life was so designed that all actions of its leaders and inhabitants could not but remain objectively 'functional' to German purposes. 'Everything that was designed to maintain its [ghetto] viability was simultaneously promoting a German goal ... Jewish efficiency in allocating space or in distributing rations was an extension of German effectiveness. Jewish rigour in taxation or labour utilization was a reinforcement of German stringency, even Jewish incorruptability could be a tool of German administration.' Second, particular care was taken that at every stage of the road the victims should be put in a situation of choice, to which criteria or rational action apply, and in which the rational decision invariably agrees with the 'managerial design'. 'The Germans were notably successful in deporting Jews by stages, because those that remained behind would reason that it was necessary to sacrifice the few in order to serve the many.'³¹ As a matter of fact, even those already deported were left with the opportunity to deploy their rationality to the very end. The gas chambers, temptingly dubbed 'bathrooms', presented a welcome sight after days spent in overcrowded, filthy cattle trucks. Those who already knew the truth and entertained no illusions still had a choice between a 'quick and painless' death, and one preceded by extra sufferings reserved for the insubordinate. Hence not only the external articulations of the ghetto setting, on which the victims had no control, were manipulated so as to transform the ghetto as a whole into an extension of the murdering machine; also the rational faculties of the 'functionaries' of that extension were deployed for the elicitation of behaviour motivated by loyalty and co-operation with the bureaucratically defined ends.

Social production of moral invisibility

So far we have tried to reconstruct the social mechanism of 'overcoming the animal pity'; a social production of conduct contrary to innate moral inhibitions, capable of transforming individuals who are not 'moral degenerates' in any of the 'normal' senses, into murderers or conscious collaborators in the murdering process. The experience of the Holocaust brings into relief, however, another social mechanism; one with a much more sinister potential of involving in the perpetration of the genocide a much wider number of people who never in the process face consciously either difficult moral choices or the need to stifle inner resistance of conscience. The struggle over moral issues never takes place, as the moral aspects of actions are not immediately obvious or are deliberately prevented from discovery and discussion. In other words, the moral character of action is either invisible or purposefully concealed.

To quote Hilberg again, 'It must be kept in mind that most of the participants [of genocide] did not fire rifles at Jewish children or pour gas into gas chambers . . . Most bureaucrats composed memoranda, drew up blueprints, talked on the telephone, and participated in conferences. They could destroy a whole people by sitting at their desk.'³² Were they aware of the ultimate product of their ostensibly innocuous bustle – such knowledge would stay, at best, in the remote recesses of their minds. Causal connections between their actions and the mass murder were difficult to spot. Little moral opprobrium was attached to the natural human proclivity to avoid worrying more than necessity required – and thus to abstain from examining the whole length of the causal chain up to its furthest links. To understand how that astounding moral blindness was possible, it is helpful to think of the workers of an armament plant who rejoice in the 'stay of execution' of their factory thanks to big new orders, while at the same time honestly bewailing the massacres visited upon each other by Ethiopians and Eritreans; or to think how it is possible that the 'fall in commodity prices' may be universally welcomed as good news while 'starvation of African children' is equally universally, and sincerely, lamented.

A few years ago John Lachs singled out the *mediation of action* (the phenomenon of one's action being performed for one by someone else, by an intermediate person, who 'stands between me and my action, making it impossible for me to experience it directly') as one of the most salient and seminal features of modern society. There is a great distance between intentions and practical accomplishments, with the space

between the two packed with a multitude of minute acts and inconsequential actors. The 'middle man' shields off the outcomes of action from the actors' sight.

The result is that there are many acts no one consciously appropriates. For the person on whose behalf they are done, they exist only verbally or in the imagination; he will not claim them as his own since he never lived through them. The man who has actually done them, on the other hand, will always view them as someone else's and himself as but the blameless instrument of an alien will ...

Without first hand acquaintance with his actions, even the best of humans moves in a moral vacuum: the abstract recognition of evil is neither a reliable guide nor an adequate motive ... [W]e shall not be surprised at the immense and largely unintentional cruelty of men of good will ...

The remarkable thing is that we are not unable to recognize wrong acts or gross injustices when we see them. What amazes us is how they could have come about when each of us did none but harmless acts ... It is difficult to accept that often there is no person and no group that planned or caused it all. It is even more difficult to see how our own actions, through their remote effects, contributed to causing misery.³³

The increase in the physical and/or psychic distance between the act and its consequences achieves more than the suspension of moral inhibition; it quashes the moral significance of the act and thereby pre-empts all conflict between personal standard of moral decency and immorality of the social consequences of the act. With most of the socially significant actions mediated by a long chain of complex causal and functional dependencies, moral dilemmas recede from sight, while the occasions for more scrutiny and conscious moral choice become increasingly rare.

A similar effect (on a still more impressive scale) is achieved by rendering the victims themselves psychologically invisible. This has been certainly one of the most decisive among the factors responsible for the escalation of human costs in modern warfare. As Philip Caputo observed, war ethos 'seems to be a matter of distance and technology. You could never go wrong if you killed people at long range with sophisticated weapons.'³⁴ With killing 'at a distance', the link between the carnage and totally innocent acts – like pulling a trigger, or switching

on the electric current, or pressing a button on a computer keyboard – is likely to remain a purely theoretical notion (the tendency enormously helped by the mere discrepancy of scale between the result and its immediate cause – an incommensurability that easily defies comprehension grounded in commonsensical experience). It is therefore possible to be a pilot delivering the bomb to Hiroshima or to Dresden, to excel in the duties assigned at a guided missile base, to design ever more devastating specimens of nuclear warheads – and all this without detracting from one's moral integrity and coming anywhere near moral collapse (invisibility of victims was, arguably, an important factor also in Milgram's infamous experiments). With this effect of the invisibility of victims in mind, it is perhaps easier to understand the successive improvements in the technology of the Holocaust. At the *Einsatzgruppen* stage, the rounded-up victims were brought in front of machine guns and killed at point-blank range. Though efforts were made to keep the weapons at the longest possible distance from the ditches into which the murdered were to fall, it was exceedingly difficult for the shooters to overlook the connection between shooting and killing. This is why the administrators of genocide found the method primitive and inefficient, as well as dangerous to the morale of the perpetrators. Other murder techniques were therefore sought – such as would optically separate the killers from their victims. The search was successful, and led to the invention of first the mobile, then the stationary gas chambers; the latter – the most perfect the Nazis had time to invent – reduced the role of the killer to that of the 'sanitation officer' asked to empty a sackful of 'disinfecting chemicals' through an aperture in the roof of a building the interior of which he was not prompted to visit.

The technical-administrative success of the Holocaust was due in part to the skilful utilization of 'moral sleeping pills' made available by modern bureaucracy and modern technology. The natural invisibility of causal connections in a complex system of interaction, and the 'distancing' of the unsightly or morally repelling outcomes of action to the point of rendering them invisible to the actor, were most prominent among them. Yet the Nazis particularly excelled in a third method, which they did not invent either, but perfected to an unprecedented degree. This was the method of making invisible the very humanity of the victims. Helen Fein's concept of the *universe of obligation* ('the circle of people with reciprocal obligations to protect each other whose bonds arise from their relation to a deity or sacred source of authority')³⁵ goes a long way towards illuminating the socio-psychological factors that

stand behind the awesome effectiveness of this method. The 'universe of obligation' designates the outer limits of the social territory inside which moral questions may be asked at all with any sense. On the other side of the boundary, moral precepts do not bind, and moral evaluations are meaningless. To render the humanity of victims invisible, one needs merely to evict them from the universe of obligation.

Within the Nazi vision of the world, as measured by one superior and uncontested value of the rights of Germanhood, to exclude the Jews from the universe of obligation it was only necessary to deprive them of the membership in the German nation and state community. In another of Hilberg's poignant phrases, 'When in the early days of 1933 the first civil servant wrote the first definition of "non-Aryan" into a civil service ordinance, the fate of European Jewry was sealed.'³⁶ To induce the co-operation (or just inaction or indifference) of non-German Europeans, more was needed. Stripping the Jews of their Germanhood, sufficient for the German SS, was evidently not enough for nations which, even if they liked the ideas promoted by the new rulers of Europe, had reasons to fear and resent their claims to the monopoly of human virtue. Once the objective of *judenfrei* Germany turned into the goal of *judenfrei* Europe, the eviction of the Jews from the German nation had to be supplanted by their total dehumanization. Hence Frank's favourite conjunction of 'Jews and lice', the change in rhetoric expressed in the transplanting of the 'Jewish question' from the context of racial self-defence into the linguistic universe of 'self-cleansing' and 'political hygiene', the typhus-warning posters on the walls of the ghettos, and finally the commissioning of the chemicals for the last act from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Schädlingbekämpfung – the German Fumigation Company.

Moral consequences of the civilizing process

Although other sociological images of the civilizing process are available, the most common (and widely shared) is one that entails, as its two centre points, the suppression of irrational and essentially antisocial drives, and the gradual yet relentless elimination of violence from social life (more precisely: concentration of violence under control of the state, where it is used to guard the perimeters of national community and conditions of social order). What blends the two centre points into one is the vision of the civilized society – at least in our own, Western and

modern, form – as, first and foremost, a moral force; as a system of institutions that co-operate and complement each other in the imposition of a normative order and the rule of law, which in turn safeguard conditions of social peace and individual security poorly defended in pre-civilized settings.

This vision is not necessarily misleading. In the light of the Holocaust, however, it certainly looks one-sided. While it opens for scrutiny important trends of recent history, it forecloses the discussion of no less crucial tendencies. Focusing on one facet of the historical process, it draws an arbitrary dividing line between norm and abnormality. By de-legitimizing some of the resilient aspects of civilization, it falsely suggests their fortuitous and transitory nature, simultaneously concealing the striking resonance between most prominent of their attributes and the normative assumptions of modernity. In other words, it diverts attention from the permanence of the alternative, destructive potential of the civilizing process, and effectively silences and marginalizes the critics who insist on the double-sidedness of modern social arrangement.

I propose that the major lesson of the Holocaust is the necessity to treat the critique seriously and thus to expand the theoretical model of the civilizing process, so as to include the latter's tendency to demote, exprobate and delegitimize the ethical motivations of social action. We need to take stock of the evidence that *the civilizing process is, among other things, a process of divesting the use and deployment of violence from moral calculus, and of emancipating the desiderata of rationality from interference of ethical norms or moral inhibitions.* As the promotion of rationality to the exclusion of alternative criteria of action, and in particular the tendency to subordinate the use of violence to rational calculus, has been long ago acknowledged as a constitutive feature of modern civilization – the Holocaust-style phenomena must be recognized as legitimate outcomes of civilizing tendency, and its constant potential.

Read again, with the benefit of hindsight, Weber's elucidation of the conditions and the mechanism of rationalization reveals these important, yet thus far the underrated, connections. We see more clearly that the conditions of the rational conduct of business – like the notorious separation between the household and the enterprise, or between private income and the public purse – function at the same time as powerful factors in isolating the end-orientated, rational action from interchange with processes ruled by other (by definition, irrational)

norms, and thus rendering it immune to the constraining impact of the postulates of mutual assistance, solidarity, reciprocal respect etc., which are sustained in the practices of non-business formations. This general accomplishment of rationalizing tendency has been codified and institutionalized, not unexpectedly, in modern bureaucracy. Subjected to the same retrospective re-reading, it reveals the silencing of morality as its major concern; as, indeed, the fundamental condition of its success as an instrument of rational coordination of action. And it also reveals its capacity of generating the Holocaust-like solution while pursuing, in impeccably rational fashion, its daily problem-solving activity.

Any rewriting of the theory of civilizing process along the suggested lines would involve by necessity a change in sociology itself. The nature and style of sociology has been attuned to the selfsame modern society it theorized and investigated; sociology has been engaged since its birth in a mimetic relationship with its object – or, rather, with the imagery of that object which it constructed and accepted as the frame for its own discourse. And so sociology promoted, as its own criteria of propriety, the same principles of rational action it visualized as constitutive of its object. It also promoted, as binding rules of own discourse, the inadmissibility of ethical problematics in any other form but that of a communally-sustained ideology and thus heterogenous to sociological (scientific, rational) discourse. *Phrases like 'the sanctity of human life' or 'moral duty' sound as alien in a sociology seminar as they do in the smoke-free, sanitized rooms of a bureaucratic office.*

In observing such principles in its professional practice, sociology did no more than partake in the scientific culture. As part and parcel of the rationalizing process, that culture cannot escape a second look. The self-imposed moral silence of science has, after all, revealed some of its less advertised aspects when the issue of production and disposal of corpses in Auschwitz has been articulated as a 'medical problem'. It is not easy to dismiss Franklin M. Littell's warnings of the credibility crisis of the modern university: 'What kind of a medical school trained Mengele and his associates? What departments of anthropology prepared the staff of Strasbourg University's "Institute of Ancestral Heredity"?'³⁷ Not to wonder for whom this particular bell tolls, to avoid the temptation to shrug off these questions as of merely historical significance, one needs search no further than Colin Gray's analysis of the momentum behind the contemporary nuclear arms race: 'Necessarily, the scientists and technologists on each side are "racing" to diminish their own ignorance (the enemy is not Soviet technology; it is

the physical unknowns that attract scientific attention) ... Highly motivated, technologically competent and adequately funded teams of research scientists will inevitably produce an endless series of brand new (or refined) weapon ideas'.³⁸

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