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The Ethics of Discomfort

Critical Perpetrator Studies and/as Education after Auschwitz

Susanne C. Knittel

In his seminal 1966 essay “Education after Auschwitz,” Theodor W. Adorno writes that “[t]he premier demand upon education is that Auschwitz not happen again” (2003, 19). This opening sentence has become something of a mantra in civic education, with Auschwitz serving as a metonym not just for the Holocaust, but also for other genocides and acts of mass violence. In the essay, Adorno characterizes genocide as “the expression of an extremely powerful societal tendency” (20), and thus the imperative that Auschwitz not happen again presupposes the acknowledgment that it was not a historical aberration without precedent or analog. He refers to the Armenian genocide as a precursor to the Holocaust and to the atomic bomb as belonging to the “same historical context as genocide” (20). In order to perceive the similarities between these acts of mass violence, Adorno argues, it is necessary to study the perpetrators rather than the victims. In this sense, then, Adorno’s essay can be regarded as a foundational text for Perpetrator Studies. Talking about education after Auschwitz also means talking about education *before* Auschwitz, namely the education that the perpetrators received: “One must come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds, must reveal these mechanisms to them, and strive, by awakening a general awareness of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again” (21). Thus, he continues, “the only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection” (ibid.).

Adorno conceives of this cultivation of critical self-awareness in Kantian terms, emphasizing the need for “autonomy,” which he defines as “the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating” (23). Later (1999), he will refer to this self-critical attitude as maturity or responsibility [*Mündigkeit*] in reference to Kant’s famous definition of the Enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity” [*Unmündigkeit*] (Kant [1784] 1983, 41). Education after Auschwitz, then, is a continuation of the project of Enlightenment, or rather, a return to the fundamental principle of that project, namely critique. The lack of critical self-reflection, in Adorno’s view, had made it possible for something like the Holocaust to occur. The only appropriate response to this failure of the Enlightenment project is to insist on more Enlightenment. This view is supported by Michel Foucault in his response to Kant’s essay. Like Adorno, Foucault seeks to decouple the Enlightenment project from a narrative of progress and teleology and instead redefines it as an attitude, a “philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era,” as a particular way of relating to one’s own position in history and a specific configuration of

power/knowledge (Foucault 2007, 109). “Critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth.” It is “the art of voluntary insubordination” (47). Critique for Foucault is thus analogous to what Adorno calls autonomy. Both are predicated on a rigorous self-questioning. This process is profoundly uncomfortable because it threatens to destabilize one’s own subject position, which is why Foucault associates it with what he calls “desubjectivation” [*désassujettissement*] (47). If subjectivation [*assujettissement*] is the process whereby an individual becomes a subject within a given socio-historical context, which also means being subject to specific norms, obligations, and limits, desubjectivation is the process whereby the individual can attempt to resist or to push against the limits imposed by society. The cultivation of a critical attitude is thus bound up with the questioning of limits, it is, indeed a “*limit-attitude*” (113), which, moreover, is aligned with what Foucault calls an “ethics of discomfort” (121). This is first and foremost a willingness to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty and to question one’s own assumptions and the conceptual frameworks according to which one apprehends the world. Furthermore, it has to do with a recognition of the continuities between past atrocities and present-day structures of inequality and political violence and one’s own implicatedness in them.¹ This recognition is doubly uncomfortable because it entails an awareness of a certain responsibility on one’s own part to resist and be critical of power and at the same time an acknowledgment of the fact that there is often very little one can do as an individual to combat structural forms of violence and injustice. The discomfort, thus, pertains on the one hand to our critical instrumentarium and on the other to our positionality and embeddedness within regimes of power/knowledge. The ethics of discomfort implies a commitment to critique and dissent but also a form of modesty regarding what one can achieve.

The ethics of discomfort pinpoints the affective dimension of education after Auschwitz. Affect has of course been a powerful tool in Holocaust and genocide education. The dominant strategies for making past atrocities relevant to young people have sought to promote identification and empathy with the victims and to elicit shock at the scale and brutality of the crimes. This is often done with photographs or archival footage, survivor testimony in the form of memoirs or recordings, or artistic or literary representations. Other popular affective strategies include visiting sites of memory and immersive experiences designed to allow students and visitors to feel (at least some approximation of) what it was like to be a victim of these atrocities. Such approaches become infinitely more complex if we shift our focus from the victims to the perpetrators.² What is the educational value of prompting students to imagine what it was like to be a perpetrator? Clearly, such an approach requires a great deal of careful framing and contextualization in order to avoid the potentially enormous moral and ethical pitfalls. On the one hand, there is the problem of fascination and of fetishization of the perpetrator as a figure of transgression. Another concern is that understanding the motivations of the perpetrators might in some way lead to a justification of their actions, or even an exculpation, to thinking of them as victims of the times, the system, or the prevailing ideology. Yet another pitfall is approaching them through a moralistic framework or from a position of moral superiority with today’s knowledge of how things ended, which is based in hindsight. Nevertheless, there is something to be gained from an affective engagement with the figure of the perpetrator, which has to do with the ethics of discomfort. Moreover, literature and art have a crucial role to play as they can both model and elicit a productive sense of discomfort.

In what follows, I will discuss two examples of creative and critical engagements with the figure of the perpetrator: a work of literary non-fiction, Helga Schubert’s *Die Welt da drinnen* (2003), and Milo Rau’s *Breivik’s Statement* (2012), a performance piece.

I discuss these works in terms of the concepts of empathic unsettlement and affirmative critique, respectively.³ My aim here is to show how they are each committed to a critical perpetrator pedagogy that is informed by an ethics of discomfort.

In her 2003 book *Die Welt da drinnen* [*The World in There*], psychologist and author Helga Schubert explores the history and memory of the Nazi euthanasia program. Drawing on medical records that became available after German reunification, Schubert reconstructs the biographies of the victims and perpetrators of the euthanasia killing center Bernburg in Saxony-Anhalt. The different biographies serve as a backdrop for a discussion of the treatment of people with disabilities and the biopolitical discourses on mercy killing, prenatal diagnostics, and genetic engineering in present-day Germany. In this way, the book draws attention to the continuities between discriminatory mechanisms of the past and the present. In the final chapter, Schubert documents a visit to a secondary school in Berlin. She recounts how she gave the students a copy of Hitler's infamous 1939 decree authorizing the mercy killing of the "incurably ill" and asked them to imagine themselves as Nazi doctors and health care officials who are now tasked with implementing this decree. At first, the students struggle with the document, puzzling over its wording, which is deliberately vague and obfuscating, and hence open to interpretation. One student says that he would simply refuse to comply. Schubert reminds him that he is a Nazi administrator, and so therefore he is probably predisposed to acquiesce to orders from the *Führer*, but that he does have the choice not to comply, though this may result in him being sent to the Eastern front. In this way, Schubert makes the students aware of the scope and the limits of their own agency in this situation. While some of the students continue to refuse to think along the lines of the perpetrators, preferring to identify with the victims, others begin to discuss criteria for selection and strategies for compliance that would be in some way justifiable. The students are obviously uncomfortable with putting themselves in the shoes of the perpetrators: "We decide who lives or dies. That's a dangerous feeling. I would rather not have to think about it anymore, it sucks you in. That was 1939. There is no reason to ponder such selection criteria today" (2003, 227, my translation). This statement by one of the students points to another avoidance strategy, namely the denial of continuity. Schubert recounts how the discussion then turns to the question of disability and mental illness and the question of what makes a life worth living and who gets to decide. Through this exercise, the students begin to question their preconceived notions of disability and what Foucault would call their own position in relation to the Nazi past and their historical present. In my book (Knittel 2015), I read this as an example of what I call the historical uncanny, namely the sudden feeling of a well-known history becoming strange and unfamiliar and at the same time much closer to home than one had previously imagined. The historical uncanny refers to a disruption in one's sense of belonging to an imagined community and hence in one's identity and relationship to a shared past. In this sense, it can trigger a process of desubjectivation in Foucault's sense.

In the end, Schubert counterbalances the perpetrators' perspective with the reconstructed biographies of some of the victims, thus confronting the students again with the incommensurability of the diagnosis and murder of these patients with the reality of their lives. In asking the students and the readers to put themselves in the perpetrators' place, Schubert employs a principle that Dominick LaCapra has called "empathic unsettlement" (2001, 41). For LaCapra, empathic unsettlement describes a responsiveness or openness to the "traumatic experience of others" that does not entail the "appropriation of their experience" (41). LaCapra is primarily concerned with the role of affect in historiography relating to trauma and victimhood. For him, the principle of empathic unsettlement is designed to work against the desire for closure, redemption, and it "places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme

events from which we attempt to derive reassurance” (41–42). LaCapra does discuss the issue of perpetrator trauma as an object of empathic unsettlement, but this may in fact be too narrow a definition. As the example of Schubert shows, an empathic engagement with perpetrators may be productively unsettling in precisely the ways LaCapra describes, regardless of whether the actual perpetrators were traumatized. Returning to the question of education after Auschwitz, we can see how empathic unsettlement can be a vehicle for the kind of critical self-reflection that Adorno calls for. What makes Schubert’s approach so compelling is that she creates an environment in which the students can engage critically with the mechanisms of perpetration while avoiding the aforementioned pitfalls of fascination, exculpation, relativization, and condemnation. In this way, the students’ discomfort can become productive and meaningful. The space in which critique takes place is not pre-given, but must be produced.

This brings me to my second example, Milo Rau’s performance piece *Breivik’s Statement*, a re-enactment of the speech Anders Breivik read out at his trial in Oslo in April 2012. The hour-long speech was not broadcast in its entirety at the time, though the text was soon available on the internet. Rau was concerned that the decision to censor Breivik’s speech in this way ultimately served only to fetishize it as dangerous and auratic. He felt that it was important for the public to be confronted with the words of this perpetrator not because they were exceptional or particularly outrageous, but rather because the rhetoric Breivik employed was so familiar. Indeed, after Breivik’s trial, spokespeople for several of Europe’s right-wing populist parties, including Geert Wilders’s Party for Freedom and Christoph Blocher’s Swiss People’s Party, responded to his self-justification by saying that they condemned his violent actions but shared his concerns about multiculturalism and immigrants. This is a distinction Rau will not accept; for him, the violence is already inherent in the words. The purpose of re-enacting this statement was thus to demythologize it and to draw attention to the dangerous proliferation and normalization of these views. In the years since, of course, this rhetoric has become increasingly prevalent and mainstream throughout Europe and the rest of the world. In the staging, Rau takes a number of steps to dissociate Breivik’s words from his persona and self-presentation. The speech is read out by the Turkish-German actress Sasha Ö. Soydan, who stands behind a lectern wearing a tracksuit and chewing gum. She looks not at the audience, but rather into a camera, which relays her image to a large screen, which occupies center stage. Such layers of mediation are typical for Rau’s style and serve to heighten the awareness that this is a representation, even as the live video-feed and the physical presence of the actress produce a sense of immediacy. Soydan reads the speech in a matter-of-fact style and does not comment on the text at any point. Nor does the staging provide any cues to the audience for how they are to interpret or respond to the speech. This absence of an unambiguous interpretative frame is deliberately uncomfortable. Two days before the piece was due to premiere at the German National Theater in Weimar, the theater abruptly canceled the performance, citing concerns that it might be misconstrued as an endorsement of Breivik’s views. In this way, the theater demonstrated a remarkable unwillingness to be uncomfortable and a singular lack of confidence in the critical abilities of its audience. Rau’s aesthetic program is built on the principle of what I refer to as affirmative critique (Knittel 2019). If negative critique entails judgment or evaluation of an object and grants a position of aloof superiority to the critic, affirmative critique, by contrast, entails an openness and a willingness to engage with the object on its own terms. This is not the same as taking it at face value or naively assenting to its premises and demands; it is rather a form of critical questioning that also puts the subject in question. Hence, affirmation is a fundamental prerequisite for critique as Foucault defines it. Critique cannot content itself with refuting or debunking views with which it disagrees, but rather must first understand how it was that these views came to be widely held in the first place. Though it is necessary to condemn Breivik, it is not sufficient, and it does not help us understand what it is about his views

that made sense to him and others like him. Affirmative critique forms part of the ethics of discomfort. As the theater's reaction to Rau's re-enactment shows, it is profoundly uncomfortable and entails a risk, one that it was clearly not prepared to take. In fact, it is a twofold risk: on the one hand, there is the risk that the affirmation will not appear critical and that the performer and director have simply reproduced a hateful speech that fails to stimulate any critical self-reflection in the audience. In order for critical self-reflection to happen, the audience must consent to be made uncomfortable. They must step out of their comfort zone and listen to the perpetrator's words, in this setting and at this moment, and re-evaluate their own position in relation to them without being told what to think. This is precisely what Kant and Adorno and Foucault mean when they define the principle of Enlightenment as a form of maturity and responsibility for one's own opinions and ideas. Rau is committed to the institution of the public sphere and to theater as an educational space. *Brevik's Statement* has been performed in theaters and other venues in many European countries and at the European Parliament. After each performance, the audience is invited to participate in a discussion about the piece and the role of art in responding to and representing political violence. The emphasis on discussion and on participation is important here since this is a fundamental function of the theater. As Hans-Thies Lehmann writes, theater is the site of a "real gathering, a place where a unique intersection of aesthetically organized and everyday real life takes place" (2006, 17; original italics). The theater is thus not simply a medium for the transmission of content to a recipient but rather a forum, a place of assembly, in which something is produced communally.⁴ Milo Rau's approach to political theater precisely emphasizes the collaborative and open-ended nature of this negotiation. In this regard, Rau is less an author than a facilitator of an encounter both on stage and off, between the audience and the perpetrator's words.

Through their interactive and confrontational staging of encounters with the figure of the perpetrator, Schubert and Rau foster critical self-reflection and a sense of discomfort with regard to the continuities between the past and the present and our own implicatedness in structures and processes of violence, discrimination, and exploitation. Furthermore, they demonstrate the important role that artistic and creative engagements with the figure of the perpetrator have to play in civic education and in critical Perpetrator Studies.

Notes

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- 1 For a theorization of implicatedness see Rothberg (2013, 2019), and for a discussion of Adorno's "Education after Auschwitz" in light of current global structures of inequality and violence see Snaza (2017).
- 2 For further reflections on the ethical implications of teaching about perpetrators, see van Alphen (2001); Zeitlin (2004); Totten (2004); Jelitzki and Wetzell (2010); Kaiser (2010); Jinks (2016); and Beorn (2015).
- 3 I discuss each of these at greater length elsewhere; see Knittel (2015, 125–133) and (2019).
- 4 I elaborate on this point in my article about Rau's Europe Trilogy (Knittel 2016).

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