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Times Literary Supplement

MODERNITY and the HOLOCAUST

Zygmunt Bauman

Modernity and the Holocaust

To Janina, and all the others
who survived to tell the truth

As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me. They do not feel any enmity to me as an individual, nor I against them. They are only 'doing their duty', as the saying goes. Most of them, I have no doubt, are kind-hearted law-abiding men who would never dream of committing murder in private life. On the other hand, if one of them succeeds in blowing me to pieces with a well-placed bomb, he will never sleep the worse for it. He is serving his country, which has the power to absolve him from evil.

George Orwell, *England your England* (1941)

Nothing is so sad as silence.

Leo Baeck, President of Reichsvertretung
der deutschen Juden, 1933–43

It is to our interest that the great historical and social question ... how could this happen? ... should retain all its weight, all its stark nakedness, all its horror.

Gershom Scholem, objecting
to the execution of Eichmann

Modernity and the Holocaust

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

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Preface

Having written down her personal story of her life in the ghetto and in hiding, Janina thanked me, her husband, for putting up with her protracted absence during the two years of writing, when she dwelled again in that world 'that was not his'. Indeed, I escaped that world of horror and inhumanity when it reached out to the most remote corners of Europe. And like so many of my contemporaries, I never tried to explore it after it vanished from earth, leaving it to linger in the haunted memory and never-healing scars of those whom it bereaved or wounded.

I knew, of course, of the Holocaust. I shared my image of the Holocaust with so many other people of my own and younger generations: a horrible crime, visited by the wicked on the innocent. A world split into mad murderers and helpless victims, with many others helping the victims when they could, but unable to help most of the time. In that world, murderers murdered because they were mad and wicked and obsessed with a mad and wicked idea. Victims went to the slaughter because they were no match to the powerful and heavily armed enemy. The rest of the world could only watch, bewildered and agonized, knowing that only the final victory of the allied armies of the anti-Nazi coalition would bring an end to human suffering. With all this knowledge, my image of the Holocaust was like a picture on the wall: neatly framed, to set the painting apart from the wallpaper and emphasize how different it was from the rest of the furnishings.

Having read Janina's book, I began to think just how much I did not know – or rather, did not think about properly. It dawned on me that I did not really understand what had happened in that 'world which was not mine'. What did happen was far too complicated to be explained in

that simple and intellectually comforting way I naively imagined sufficient. I realized that the Holocaust was not only sinister and horrifying, but also an event not at all easy to comprehend in habitual, 'ordinary' terms. This event had been written down in its own code which had to be broken first to make understanding possible.

I wanted historians and social scientists and psychologists to make sense of it and explain it to me. I explored library shelves that I had never inspected before, and I found these shelves tightly packed, overflowing with meticulous historical studies and profound theological tracts. There were a few sociological studies as well – skilfully researched and poignantly written. The evidence amassed by the historians was overwhelming in volume and content. Their analyses were cogent and profound. They showed beyond reasonable doubt that the Holocaust was a window, rather than a picture on the wall. Looking through that window, one can catch a rare glimpse of many things otherwise invisible. And the things one can see are of the utmost importance not just for the perpetrators, victims and witnesses of the crime, but for all those who are alive today and hope to be alive tomorrow. What I saw through this window I did not find at all pleasing. The more depressing the view, however, the more I was convinced that if one refused to look through the window, it would be at one's peril.

And yet I had not looked through that window before, and in not looking I did not differ from my fellow sociologists. Like most of my colleagues, I assumed that the Holocaust was, at best, something to be illuminated by us social scientists, but certainly not something that can illuminate the objects of our current concerns. I believed (by default rather than by deliberation) that the Holocaust was an interruption in the normal flow of history, a cancerous growth on the body of civilized society, a momentary madness among sanity. Thus I could paint for the use of my students a picture of normal, healthy, sane society, leaving the story of the Holocaust to the professional pathologists.

My complacency, and that of my fellow sociologists, was greatly helped (though not excused) by certain ways in which the memory of the Holocaust had been appropriated and deployed. It had been all-too-often sedimented in the public mind as a tragedy that occurred to the Jews and the Jews alone, and hence, as far as all the others were concerned, called for regret, commiseration, perhaps apology, but not much more than that. Time and again it had been narrated by Jews and non-Jews alike as a collective (and sole) property of the Jews, as something to be left to, or jealously guarded by, those who escaped the

shooting and the gassing, and by the descendants of the shot and the gassed. In the end both views – the 'outside' and the 'inside' – complemented each other. Some self-appointed spokesmen for the dead went as far as warning against thieves who collude to steal the Holocaust from the Jews, 'christianize' it, or just dissolve its uniquely Jewish character in the misery of an indistinct 'humanity'. The Jewish state tried to employ the tragic memories as the certificate of its political legitimacy, a safe-conduct pass for its past and future policies, and above all as the advance payment for the injustices it might itself commit. Each for reasons of its own, such views contributed to the entrenchment of the Holocaust in public consciousness as an exclusively Jewish affair, of little significance to anyone else (including the Jews themselves as human beings) obliged to live in modern times and be members of modern society. Just how much and how perilously the significance of the Holocaust had been reduced to that of a private trauma and grievance of one nation was brought to me recently in a flash, by a learned and thoughtful friend of mine. I complained to him that I had not found in sociology much evidence of universally important conclusions drawn from the Holocaust experience. 'Is it not amazing,' my friend replied, 'considering how many Jewish sociologists there are?'

One read of the Holocaust on anniversaries, commemorated in front of mostly Jewish audiences and reported as events in the life of Jewish communities. Universities have launched special courses on the history of the Holocaust, which, however, were taught separately from courses in general history. The Holocaust has been defined by many as a specialist topic in Jewish history. It has attracted its own specialists, the professionals who kept meeting and lecturing to each other at specialist conferences and symposia. However, their impressively productive and crucially important work seldom finds it way back to the mainstream of scholarly discipline and cultural life in general – much like most other specialized interests in our world of specialists and specializations.

When it does find that way at all, more often than not it is allowed on the public stage in a sanitized and hence ultimately demobilizing and comforting form. Pleasantly resonant with public mythology, it can shake the public out of its indifference to human tragedy, but hardly out of its complacency – like the American soap-opera dubbed *Holocaust*, which showed well-bred and well-behaved doctors and their families (just like your Brooklyn neighbours), upright, dignified and morally unscathed, marched to the gas chambers by the revolting Nazi degenerates aided by uncouth and blood-thirsty Slav peasants. David G.

Roskies, an insightful and deeply empathetic student of Jewish reactions to the Apocalypse, has noted the silent yet relentless work of self-censorship – the 'heads bowed to the ground' of the ghetto poetry being replaced by the 'heads lifted in faith' in the later editions. 'The more the grey was eliminated,' Roskies concludes, 'the more the Holocaust as archetype could take on its specific contours. The Jewish dead were absolutely good, the Nazis and their collaborators were absolutely evil.'[1] Hannah Arendt was shouted down by the chorus of offended feelings when she suggested that the victims of an inhuman regime might have lost some of their humanity on the road to perdition.

The Holocaust was indeed a *Jewish tragedy*. Though Jews were not the only population subjected to a 'special treatment' by the Nazi regime (six million Jews were among more than 20 million people annihilated at Hitler's behest), only the Jews had been marked for total destruction, and allotted no place in the New Order that Hitler intended to install. Even so, the Holocaust was not simply a *Jewish problem*, and not an event in *Jewish history* alone. *The Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture.* The self-healing of historical memory which occurs in the consciousness of modern society is for this reason more than a neglect offensive to the victims of the genocide. It is also a sign of dangerous and potentially suicidal blindness.

This self-healing process does not necessarily mean that the Holocaust vanishes from memory altogether. There are many signs to the contrary. Apart from a few revisionist voices denying the reality of the event (which seem, if inadvertently, only to add to the public awareness of the Holocaust through the sensational headlines they provoke), the cruelty of the Holocaust and its impact on the victims (and particularly on survivors) seem to occupy a growing place among public interests. Topics of this kind have become almost obligatory – if on the whole auxiliary – sub-plots in films, TV plays or novels. And yet there is little doubt that the self-healing does take place – through two intertwined processes.

One is the forcing of the Holocaust history into the status of a specialist industry left to its own scientific institutes, foundations and conference circuit. A frequent and well-known effect of the branching-off of scholarly disciplines is that the link of the new specialism with the main area of research becomes tenuous; the mainstream is little affected by the concerns and discoveries of the new specialists, and soon also by

the peculiar language and imagery they develop. More often than not, the branching off means that the scholarly interests delegated to specialist institutions are thereby eliminated from the core canon of the discipline; they are, so to speak, particularized and marginalized, deprived in practice, if not necessarily in theory, of more general significance; thus mainstream scholarship is absolved from further preoccupation with them. And so we see that while the volume, depth and scholarly quality of specialist works in Holocaust history grow at an impressive pace, the amount of space and attention devoted to it in general accounts of modern history does not; if anything, it is easier now to be excused from a substantive analysis of the Holocaust by appending a respectably long list of scholarly references.

Another process is the already-noted sanitation of the Holocaust imagery sedimented in popular consciousness. Public information about the Holocaust has been all-too-often associated with commemorative ceremonies and the solemn homilies such ceremonies attract and legitimize. Occasions of this kind, however important in other respects, offer little room for the depth analysis of the Holocaust experience – and particularly of its more unsightly and disturbing aspects. Less still of this already limited analysis finds its way into public consciousness, served by the non-specialist and generally accessible information media.

When the public is called to think of the most awesome of questions – 'How was such a horror possible? How could it happen in the heart of the most civilized part of the world?' – its tranquility and balance of mind are seldom disturbed. Discussion of guilt masquerades as the analysis of causes; the roots of the horror, we are told, must be sought and will be found in Hitler's obsession, the obsequiousness of his henchmen, the cruelty of his followers and the moral corruption sown by his ideas; perhaps, if we search a little further, they may also be found in certain peculiar convolutions of German history, or in the particular moral indifference of ordinary Germans – an attitude only to be expected in view of their overt or latent antisemitism. What follows in most cases the call 'to try to understand how such things were possible' is a litany of revelations about the odious state called the Third Reich, and about Nazi bestiality or other aspects of 'the German malady' which, as we believe and are encouraged to go on believing, point to something 'that runs against the planet's grain'.[2] It is said as well that only once we are fully aware of the bestialities of Nazism and their causes 'will it ever be possible, if not to heal, at least to cauterize the wound which Nazism has made in Western civilization'.[3] One of the possible interpretations (not

necessarily intended by the authors) of these and similar views, is that once the moral and material responsibility of Germany, Germans and the Nazis is established, the search for the causes will be completed. Like the Holocaust itself, its causes were enclosed in a confined space and a limited (now, fortunately, finished) time.

Yet the exercise in focusing on the *Germanness* of the crime as on that aspect in which the explanation of the crime must lie is simultaneously an exercise in exonerating everyone else, and particularly *everything* else. The implication that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were a wound or a malady of our civilization – rather than its horrifying, yet legitimate product – results not only in the moral comfort of self-exculpation, but also in the dire threat of moral and political disarmament. It all happened 'out there' – in another time, another country. The more 'they' are to blame, the more the rest of 'us' are safe, and the less we have to do to defend this safety. Once the allocation of guilt is implied to be equivalent to the location of causes, the innocence and sanity of the way of life of which we are so proud need not be cast in doubt.

The overall effect is, paradoxically, pulling the sting out of the Holocaust memory. The message which the Holocaust contains about the way we live today – about the quality of the institutions on which we rely for our safety, about the validity of the criteria with which we measure the propriety of our own conduct and of the patterns of interaction we accept and consider normal – is silenced, not listened to, and remains undelivered. If unravelled by the specialists and discussed inside the conference circuit, it is hardly ever heard elsewhere, and remains a mystery for all the outsiders. It has not entered as yet (at any rate not in a serious way) contemporary consciousness. Worse still, it has not as yet affected contemporary practice.

This study is intended as a small and modest contribution to what seems to be, in the circumstances, a long-overdue task of a formidable cultural and political importance; the task of bringing the sociological, psychological and political lessons of the Holocaust episode to bear on the self-awareness and practice of the institutions and the members of contemporary society. This study does not offer any new account of Holocaust history; in this respect, it relies entirely on the astounding achievement of recent specialist research, which I did my best to ransack and to which my debt is boundless. Instead, this study focuses on such revisions in various quite central areas of the social sciences (and possibly also social practices) as have been made necessary in view of the processes, trends and hidden potentials revealed in the course of the

Holocaust. *The purpose of the various investigations of the present study is not to add to specialist knowledge and to enrich certain marginal preoccupations of social scientists, but to open up the findings of the specialists to the general use of social science, to interpret them in a way that shows their relevance to the main themes of sociological inquiry, to feed them back into the mainstream of our discipline,* and thus to lift them up from their present marginal status into the central area of social theory and sociological practice.

Chapter 1 is a general survey of sociological responses (or, rather, of the glaring paucity of such responses) to certain theoretically crucial and practically vital issues raised by Holocaust studies. Some of these issues are then analysed separately and more fully in subsequent chapters. And so in chapters 2 and 3 are explored the tensions emanated by the boundary-drawing tendencies under the new conditions of modernization, the breakdown of the traditional order, the entrenchment of modern national states, the connections between certain attributes of modern civilization (the role of scientific rhetoric in the legitimization of social-engineering ambitions being most prominent among them), the emergence of the racist form of communal antagonism, and the association between racism and genocidal projects. Having thus proposed that the Holocaust was a characteristically modern phenomenon that cannot be understood out of the context of cultural tendencies and technical achievements of modernity, in chapter 4, I attempt to confront the problem of the truly dialectical combination of uniqueness and normality in the status occupied by the Holocaust among other modern phenomena; I suggest in the conclusion that *the Holocaust was an outcome of a unique encounter between factors by themselves quite ordinary and common; and that the possibility of such an encounter could be blamed to a very large extent on the emancipation of the political state, with its monopoly of means of violence and its audacious engineering ambitions, from social control – following the step-by-step dismantling of all non-political power resources and institutions of social self-management.*

Chapter 5 undertakes the unrewarding and painful task of analysing one of those things that we 'prefer to leave unspoken'[4] with particular zeal; the modern mechanisms that allow for the co-operation of victims in their own victimization and those which, contrary to the vaunted dignifying and moralizing effects of the civilizing process, condition a progressively dehumanizing impact of coercive authority. One of the 'modern connections' of the Holocaust, its intimate link with the pattern

of authority developed to perfection in modern bureaucracy, is the subject of chapter 6 – an extended commentary to the crucial socio-psychological experiments conducted by Milgram and Zimbardo. Chapter 7, serving as the theoretical synthesis and conclusion, surveys the present status of morality in the dominant versions of social theory and argues in favour of its radical revision – which would focus on the revealed capacity of social manipulation of social (physical and spiritual) distance.

Diversity of their topics notwithstanding, I hope that all the chapters point in the same direction and reinforce one central message. *They are all arguments in favour of assimilating the lessons of the Holocaust in the mainstream of our theory of modernity and of the civilizing process and its effects.* They all proceed from the conviction that the experience of the Holocaust contains crucial information about the society of which we are members.

The Holocaust was a unique encounter between the old tensions which modernity ignored, slighted or failed to resolve – and the powerful instruments of rational and effective action that modern development itself brought into being. Even if their encounter was unique and called for a rare combination of circumstances, the factors that came together in that encounter were, and are still, ubiquitous and 'normal'. Not enough has been done after the Holocaust to fathom the awesome potential of these factors and less still to paralyse their potentially gruesome effects. I believe that much more can be done – and certainly should be done – in both respects.

While writing this book, I greatly benefited from the criticism and advice of Bryan Cheyette, Shmuel Eisenstadt, Ferenc Fehèr, Agnes Heller, Lukasz Hirszowicz and Victor Zaslavsky. I hope they will find in these pages more than a marginal evidence of their ideas and inspiration. I owe a particular debt to Anthony Giddens for the attentive reading of the successive versions of the book, thoughtful criticism and most valuable advice. To David Roberts goes my gratitude for all his editorial care and patience.

1

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 consquence 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 Fein[5] 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 concept 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 bewailing 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 it 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 consquences' 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.*

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 effectivenes 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