

Functionalism, Intentionalism, And The Concept Of Scapegoating

Excerpt from interview with Professor Dominick LaCapra

Cornell University

June 9, 1998, Jerusalem

Interviewer: Amos Goldberg

Q- There are two large schools of thought in the historiography of the Holocaust and of Nazism: the functionalist versus the intentionalist approach. Can you explain your critique of both of these schools? What is your suggestion concerning the scapegoating, and why is it different in essence (if you can say that), from the above-mentioned two approaches?

L- One would have to argue that there is no singular key to the explanation of the Holocaust. There are a number of factors, and often it's very difficult to give the appropriate weight to the different factors. Most people at the present time (for example, Christopher Browning or Friedlander) are neither functionalist nor intentionalist. They see a limited value to both approaches: that there are some elements that were planned, at least on some level, even if you cannot go back to 1923 and see an entire schema of the Holocaust laid out. There are those who would also argue that the dynamic of institutions, the functioning of institutions, the activity of bureaucrats on the middle and lower levels were significant phenomena – these are the things that are generally focused on by functionalists. So most people now would argue that there is not really a debate, and that the quotification of something as a debate between two schools is a sign of its professionalization within a discipline. This is something that's understandable, and also something one might want to counteract.

One way of counteracting it is by seeing what the combatants actually share, and what is invisible to them. I'll deal with the functionalist/intentionalist

controversy indirectly, in two stages: first in terms of the contemporary debate (about which I've learned while I'm here) – the Zionist/post-Zionist debate in Israeli historiography. This certainly is very important. The post-Zionists are arguing that the very Zionist redemptive narrative blinded people to certain aspects of the Israeli past, including the ways in which relations between Israelis and Palestinians were much more complicated than would be implied by the “David and Goliath” narrative. And that the entire question of relationship to the Palestinians has to be rethought.

One of the great moves in this enterprise was Benny Morris's book on the 1948 war. What is very interesting from the outside, however, is the way in which both the Zionists and the post-Zionists share a great deal. They share a focus, if not a fixation, on Israel, often in non-comparative ways. Their interest in the Holocaust is pretty much limited to the reactions of Zionist leaders to the Holocaust. What is not renewed in the entire debate is, for example, the question of world Jewry, including German Jewry, Yiddishkeit, the significance of the reconstruction of Yiddishkeit, and the importance of the Diaspora. You might say that within the Zionist narrative, the Diaspora was an erring that somehow showed the necessity of the State of Israel. This is not the message of the post-Zionist narrative, but still the Diaspora is marginalized in the post-Zionist narrative. You don't have a new reading of the Diaspora. From the outside, you can see what these contending schools tend to share, which is extremely important, but not very visible to them, because they're so caught up in the debate that its terms pretty much define the parameters of the argument.

Something similar happens with the intentionalists versus the functionalists. There, too, you might say that they share a great deal, and also don't look carefully enough at certain dimensions of the Shoah. What I've been trying to insist upon is that the dimension they don't look carefully at is a certain aspect of Nazi ideology in practice. This I tend to see in terms of a somewhat crazed sacrificialism and scapegoating, which seems especially uncanny and out of place because it happens within a modernized context, where indeed you do

have phenomena such as extensive bureaucratization, industrialization of mass murder, functional imperatives, and so forth. One can see these dimensions and how important they are. For me, they involve scapegoating in a specific sense, scapegoating related to a horror, an almost ritual and phobic horror over contamination by “the other.” And that within a certain Nazi framework, the Jew was a pollutant or a contaminant within the Volksgemeinschaft that had to be eliminated for the Aryan people to re-achieve its purity.

I made a comment like that at a conference here. The person sitting next to me was Gabriel Bach, a prosecutor at the Eichmann Trial, who said this brought to mind many documents that had crossed his desk. He mentioned one document, which is really rather incredible. (There was a practice at the time of taking milk from mothers who didn't need it for their own children – either because the child had died, or because they had excessive milk – and using the mother's milk for other babies.) Bach referred to a really vitriolic, angry letter from a German, complaining that milk taken from a woman who was one-quarter Jewish might contaminate the German babies to whom it was fed. That's very much a case of a fear of pollution through a kind of crazy, misplaced ritual anxiety. So that's one component; and part of the regenerative, or what Friedlander calls redemptive, violence of the Holocaust was directed at trying to eradicate that fear of contamination.

The way in which it was done is related to another dimension of sacrificialism, which in a secular context is very close to the sublime, and is a displacement of the sacred. It's a sort of secular sacred, related to something that goes beyond ordinary experience, and is almost, if not altogether, transcendent. Within the Nazi phenomenon you had something like a fascination with unheard-of transgression, bound up with this fear of ritual contamination that led to behavior that is otherwise unintelligible: extremely cruel, at times gleeful, pleasure in the suffering of others; and scenes that are almost like those out of a carnival – scenes of bloody massacre, where people are elated at what is happening, and in ways that may be incomprehensible to them,

themselves, if you start asking them about it, and that they may very well repress in later life.

So the intentionalists stress conscious policy, and there are aspects of ideology that may not be altogether conscious to the person, at least in terms of the way they operate. People may know what they're doing, in the sense that they're doing it. But what they're doing they may not entirely know, or why it's captivating for them. Again, one of the things that I evoke as a kind of proof text of this is Himmler's 1943 Posen speech. This is a speech that should be read very, very carefully as a document of Nazi ideology, which can be taken rather seriously because it wasn't meant simply as propaganda. It was addressed to upper-level SS people by someone in the know, to people in the know, in terms of an intimacy. At the beginning of the speech, Himmler actually says that on this occasion alone, the Nazi taboo on silence about what they're doing can be broken, and something can be told that otherwise will always be kept in secret. Then he goes on to explain what it is that they're involved in. Here, too, what the nature of scapegoating is, and how something is intelligible in scapegoating that may not be from another perspective, for example, the movement from expulsion to extermination.

Many historians have spent years on research trying to trace exactly when was the move from expulsion of the Jews to extermination of the Jews. That is an important problem, and in many ways, the movement from expulsion to extermination is a drastic difference, certainly for the people involved. But within the scapegoat mechanism, it can be a minute step, and a step quickly taken, because the basic problem within this frame of reference, where there is a certain horror at contamination by "the other," is getting rid of "the other" – *entfernen*, in German. How this is done is more a secondary issue: It can be expulsion, it can be extermination, but the problem is the getting rid of. This is very much at play within Himmler's speech, where the expulsion and the extermination are separated only by a comma in the speech itself. Then Himmler goes on to give his understanding of what it is to be hard within Nazi ideology, what Nazi hardness is. In his own terms, it is a combination of two

things that seem to be antithetical, bringing together the extremes of what would seem to be a binary opposition: remaining decent – *anstaendig geblieben zu sein* – morally beautiful, upright, while at the same time engaging in unheard-of transgression.

The way in which he expresses that is in terms of seeing 100, 500, 1,000 corpses lying side by side. He says that most of you [the SS officers] will understand what that means. This kind of endless expanse of corpses in a repetitive process of killing, repeating traumatic scenes of killing, is, in its own distorted way, the Kantian mathematical sublime, which increases geometrically. So you have the combination of these two seemingly antithetical things: the morally beautiful, remaining decent – and the typical cases given by other people are the German who loves his wife and family, goes home, is a wonderful family man, feeds his canary, loves his dog, and so forth, remaining morally upright. Being *Biedermeier* in your private life, and at the same time engaging in these incredibly unheard-of scenes of mass devastation, which is a kind of negative sublime, something that goes beyond ordinary experience and that most people would find utterly unbelievable.

That is the dimension of Nazi ideology in practice. It is significant, again, not to become fixated on, but to introduce, because it's probably the most difficult thing to understand. It's not difficult to understand how a person has a plan of extermination and tries to carry it out. It's not difficult to understand how bureaucracies function and have certain consequences, and how people try to do their job, and how you have little functionally rational technocrats who are trying to arrange demographic schemes. What's difficult to understand is that combined with other things that really seem out of place.

Most people who've discussed Daniel Goldhagen's book have not seen that as something he touches upon himself, but doesn't know how to explain. Goldhagen, in his book, gives many examples of almost carnivalesque glee in doing things that were not required by the situation, that were not functional. He, himself, cannot really explain this, and simply invokes, time and time

again, the phrase “eliminationist antisemitism.” This phrase becomes a kind of mantra that's never fully explicated, and it's also involved in a very rash generalization concerning all the German people for generations back, which is almost a stereotype of national character.

But what's significant in Goldhagen's enterprise is that there is a small, good book struggling to get out of the very big, dubious book. And that very small, good book provides documentation for an involvement in outlandish transgression and even taking a carnivalesque glee in the suffering of others that doesn't seem to be intelligible from any rational point of view. One has to try to approximate, at least, an understanding of why this was happening, because I don't think this was unique to the Germans, but was something that had happened elsewhere. What was distinctive to the Germans was the extent to which it went, and the way in which it was bound up with other things, such as more “rational” dimensions of behavior. But that's a possibility for virtually anyone, and one has to recognize that as a possibility for oneself. It's only with that that one has some chance of resisting even reduced analogues of certain kinds of behavior, including victimization in one's own experience.

Q- You mentioned that scapegoating is ubiquitous and not unique to the Holocaust. One still has to question, though, how a total mass murder such as the Shoah could take place.

L- That's right. What's different about the Nazis is the extent to which they went in their attempt to eliminate difference – that extent is paradoxically what made them different. And how can you possibly explain it? One can agree that that is distinctive, that with respect to the Jews (in contradistinction to the other groups of victims), the goal was the elimination, down to the last child, of this people anywhere in the world. That you would persecute them anywhere in the world, you would follow them anywhere in the world. This is obviously where Nazi policy became irrational with respect to its own goals: the extermination of the Jews might preempt economic or military considerations,

so that when either a bureaucrat or a military leader in a certain area said, “Look, you want us to kill these people, these are skilled craftspeople, we absolutely need them for the war effort,” the answer they received was, Look, you don't understand what's going on, you have to do this, even if it counters economic or military policy ”.

How do you understand, or try to understand, that? I try to do so in terms of this problem of enemy brothers – there were so many ways in which German Jewry, and Germans, were extremely close culturally, in a lot of different ways. German Jews did not believe that their German culture, their German quality, could be denied them. The unpreparedness of German Jews was very much linked up with the extent to which they felt German, culturally. They could not believe what was happening to them.

One recent, and almost fantastic, example of this is the diaries of Victor Klemperer, who managed to survive the war, and who always believed that he was a good German. He even believed that the Germans were a chosen people, and that the Nazis were un-German; that he, himself, as a German Jew was German, and even part of the chosen people, whereas the Nazis were the un-Germans. And that's sort of the extreme limit of the sense of German Jewry, especially more assimilated German Jewry: that German *Bildung* was their *Bildung*. The apprehension on the part of the Nazis, including Hitler, was that indeed this was true. That's why it was so hard to bring about not only a distinction, but this utter and total difference between the German and the Jew, because that difference was so unbelievably implausible, given the cultural formation of the peoples, that they did indeed owe so much to each other, and were utterly hybridized as a people. The need to extirpate from oneself what is indeed a very intimate part of oneself leads to incredibly rash behavior. This is one aspect of it. This is, in a sense, the problem of enemy brothers, where the animosity came from the Germans (not initially from the Jews, obviously), but was flowing overwhelmingly in one direction, and the hostility – that kind of crazy desire to get rid of something that is very much part of yourself is like ripping organs from yourself.

Q- Most of the Holocaust took place in Eastern Europe, where Jews were very removed from German culture. What is your explanation?

L- We'll come to this in a second. The big problem, from the Nazi point of view, was that of the Jew who could pass, and who in that sense was a kind of invisible presence that was presumably totally different, but whose difference could not be perceived. In the case of Eastern European Jewry, the differences could be perceived, and there you could have the stereotype acting as a kind of sledgehammer. How do you explain this? What happens in certain forms of extremist ideology based on scapegoating and a kind of sacrificialism is that you oppose "the other" for contradictory reasons, and that there can be no counter-evidence to the ideology. So the Jews were to be eliminated, both because they could pass, and because they were so utterly different that they could be immediately identified, just as they should be eliminated because they were both the bearers of capitalism and communism simultaneously; both the bearers of modernity (just like the Germans), and the bearers of anti-modernity and reaction, which the Germans wanted to overcome in themselves as well. There were elements of German society that were not altogether modern as well, that somehow had to be reconstructed in the German image.

Source: The Multimedia CD 'Eclipse Of Humanity', Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.