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Toward a Critical History of the Holocaust: Response to Dan Stone, "Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History"

Dan Stone's essay is an excellent summary of the limitations of Holocaust historiography as it currently exists—the literature is voluminous and yet narrow methodologically and theoretically, having ignored or neglected the questions that have engaged intellectual and cultural historians for over two decades: what constitutes self-reflexive writing? How do we address narrative, its uses and limits? How can we work with the very categories, including liberalism, democracy, and gender, that we must subject to critique? His proposal to move beyond these limitations, imposed by historians' conviction that the Holocaust matters too much to subject it to the whimsy of theorists who might treat it as a "text" rather than as the social facts of murder and killing that must be accounted for, is extremely welcome and long overdue.[1] My questions concern not his proposal, but how cultural history might actually accomplish this goal.

Cultural history has, in the past two decades, made a place for itself alongside more traditional specializations in political, economic, social, and intellectual history. In turning towards anthropological and literary theory, historians of culture broadly conceived have explored the meanings of practices and events alongside more conventional efforts to find their causes. They often focus on the social history of culture (on institutions, media, and professions), or on describing how representations (say of gender) establish reality. Thus, Stone suggests that historians of the Holocaust

1 A call for papers from a theoretically sophisticated scholar at the University of Queensland for a collection on modern French gender and sexuality recently sent out to a wide array of subscribers over H-Net France on August, 11, 2008, exemplifies this anxiety. It indicates the level of defensiveness among those historians committed to critical theory before the historical profession at large. "Part of the purpose of the volume will be to stake out the territory of this approach so as to draw attention to its particular epistemological value. It is designed to help to avoid some of the misunderstandings that sometimes occur when those of us who work in this way are criticised for over-emphasising the representational over the real, or the cultural over the social, as happens particularly when representational approaches lack consideration of other contextual dimensions . . . I hope the volume will show that history of engendering and sexualizing politics can operate in full accordance with the historicist principles of the discipline, rather than being viewed as a poststructuralist challenge that privileges 'text' over all other realities."

return to ideology, not simply as the history of antisemitism and the ways in which it became part of the "shared mental space" of societies, but also in order to demonstrate the power relations manifest in the patterns of shared meaning. He encourages empirical studies of the "role played by the professions and academic disciplines" in the constitution of Nazi ethics and wartime propaganda, but ones informed by a commitment to understanding antisemitism as fantasy and hallucination that constituted worlds of meaning. Thus he seeks a return to cultural anthropology in its Geertzian form as the investigation of shared symbolic and hence cultural meaning, updated not only to allow historians to take Nazi beliefs seriously rather than treating them as alien and irrational, but also to discern relations of power in symbolic form. This intuition follows James MacMillan's assertion about a decade ago that the "new cultural history" provided social historians with a new avenue back to political history.[2] In short (and by reference to Alon Confino's work), Stone argues further that a cultural historical approach presumes that culture cannot be reduced merely to context but requires an analysis of the symbolic dimension of life.

That such studies have been undertaken and could be more effective were they to follow Stone's suggestions goes without saying. But I wonder to what extent Stone is addressing the core methodological (not to mention theoretical) problem in Holocaust history. After all, those who used to be "new" cultural historians tend not to move beyond the foci Stone outlines to establish how more precisely representations constitute meaning (other than that they reflect social facts or establish normative patterns of thought). In suggesting the return (updated, to be sure) to the study of culture, conceived as a shared set of symbolic meanings, Stone seems to want rightly to expand the dimensions of analysis undertaken by Holocaust historiography, but does not grapple directly with what he defines as an important question: that the Holocaust generated "experiences [that remain] opaque to meaning production." Indeed, as he puts it, "Most of what I have discussed so far concerns cultural interpretations of Nazism and of the Third Reich's agencies and institutions. When it comes to turning our attention to the murder process itself, the task becomes harder".[3] Given the growing list of historians who are engaging in cultural analyses of Nazism, is it not this question about the opacity of meaning that has led, as Stone usefully points out, to the Holocaust's central position among theorists interested in the short-circuiting rather than generation of meaning production? Is it not this question that historians of the Holocaust feel they have no business engaging, not because they have no interest in cultural history, but because, as Christopher Browning once put it, only a terribly arrogant historian would try to explain experiences which historiographical

2 James F. MacMillan, "Social History, 'New Cultural History,' and the Rediscovery of Politics: Some Recent Work on Modern France," *The Journal of Modern History* 66 (1994): 755–772.

3 Dan Stone, "Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History," *Dapim*, this ed., P. 62.

conventions render inexplicable?[4] Or to put it differently, how would a focus on anti-Semitic hallucinations and fantasies change our understanding of Nazism if they are conceived within extant historiographical frameworks?

Stone implies that the symbolic dimension of culture cannot necessarily be reduced to contextualization (symbols, after all, are polysemic and by definition never what they claim to be), so that cultural history could disrupt meaning-conferring coherence by thwarting the historian's attempt at narrative mastery. And yet, he does not push this insight further. He thus addresses the limits of the subject matter engaged by Holocaust historians, but he does not directly address how the limits of Holocaust historiography are methodological and theoretical. That is why, I sense, the essay oscillates between two registers: the rhetorically forceful insistence on the value of analyzing the symbolic dimensions of culture via empirical analysis; and the quieter discussion of opacity, when resolutions to various questions admittedly become harder to think through.

I have argued thus far that it is hard to understand how this move to cultural history would help us understand the opacity of meaning when its entire focus is on decoding symbols to recreate (shared) meaning production. Thus when Michael Rothberg, in *Traumatic Realism*,[5] argues that realism stages its own failure in non-historiographical representations of the Holocaust, mostly memoirs, it is not exactly the same as saying that history writing should be self-reflexive and aware of its own mediation. That project is surely important. But in Rothberg's (and others') view, representations that stage their own failure to capture what they set out to represent foreground their own incapacity to generate the sort of reliable meaning that counts for historians: hence the modifier "traumatic" in reference to realism.

We might look to recent works by Saul Friedländer and Jan Gross on Jewish trauma to get at what I believe Stone is pushing us to think through more effectively when he refers to opacity. Both Friedländer and Gross contest what Eric Santner has termed "narrative fetishism": the ways in which the narrative of an event (in this case the German narrative of national identity in the face of Jewish trauma or the Polish narrative of the nation's victimization) covers up what has been lost and contributes to an "inability to mourn" the damage one has wrought and thus the loss of others.[6] Friedländer asserts—in contrast to traditional narrative—that he wants to "suspend disbelief" and make the reader, as Jan Gross puts it more directly, "uncomfortable."

4 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992) 188.

5 Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis, 2000).

6 Eric Santner, "History Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma". In Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'* (Cambridge, 1992) 144; Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939–1945* (New York, 2007); Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Antisemitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (New York, 2006).

Stone praises Friedländer but also places him on the list of those who muse about theoretical questions but whose own efforts fall short. But one might also argue that Friedländer, in the second volume of his magisterial study of the destruction of European Jewry, *The Years of Extermination*, seeks not only to bring perpetrators and victims into the same story (for which Stone rightly praises him), but also offers a perhaps under-conceptualized and yet deceptively simple narrative. He emphasizes the historian's loss of mastery at the heart of the most ambitious synthesis of the history of the destruction of modern European Jewry since Raul Hilberg's seemingly exhaustive work, which focused primarily on German perpetrators and the killing apparatus.[7] Throughout his well-ordered, highly readable, and richly documented narrative, Friedländer's work mimics narrative mastery, but his account is a mimetic adaptation that disrupts the reader's comfort and expectations. To cite but one example, Friedländer begins his tale with a long description of a photograph of a young Jewish medical student being awarded his degree that is not reproduced in the text, a refusal not only of the desire for correspondence between the text and image (and thus mimetic reference), but also an acknowledgment that the historians cannot recreate the conditions under which the youth's destiny could be adequately represented. He repeats this kind of gesture throughout the book, though still constrained by narrative time (a source, perhaps, of Stone's frustration with his work) and even in his insistence on discomfort, creates a sufficiently masterful story that he won the Pulitzer Prize. Still, this kind of mimetic adaptation comes closer to acknowledging the opacity of the event than the kind of cultural history that wrests symbols back to their sources, as it were, in the material world, and then reads them as evidence of how that world is reflected and organized at another level of meaning.

Finally, in *Fear*, Jan Gross insists that he has told the tale of why Poles murdered Jews after 1946 in empirically unassailable fashion. He claims to have done so because he has "proven" by documents that Poles killed Jews because they felt so badly about expropriating them that they wanted all reminders of their guilt expunged. The author insists that his book is nothing but "history"—the assemblage of documents that speak for themselves—and yet his brilliant narrative departs mostly from convention: it is not a form of repression but a shattering, brutal assault on any attempt to deny what happened, which interestingly cannot take the form of conventional historiography that claims that its primary purposes is to document and interpret precisely the facts. Thus the reader must question why this apparent lesson in the truisms of what makes good history writing goes against the grain of all those conventions: in Polish, the text is even angrier, sparing nothing by using terms so violent (though spoken by postwar Poles) that the reader can barely continue, and is shorn of the

7 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, rev. ed. (New York, 1985).

first chapter meant to contextualize the history of Poland after the war for English-language readers that follows the pattern of a more familiar and comforting narrative.[8] It is not clear why Gross believes that he has proven that Poles felt guilty about having Jewish quilts on their beds and blood on their hands and therefore spilled more Jewish blood—he documents only that Poles expropriated Jews and benefitted from spoils and then killed them, randomly. Yet most interestingly, Gross cannot tell this story using the conventions of mainstream historiography, and even his explanation of why Poles killed Jews has no foundation in empirically verifiable experience but can exist only as speculation.

In any case, most important is that both these books seek, consciously and otherwise, to address the opacity question: Friedländer by invoking it consistently and giving the reader a sense of his or her own inability to grasp how Jews are made to disappear, and Gross by shedding so much light he believes the evidence cannot lie. In both instances, these books appear to conform to mainstream conventions while necessarily undermining them. For our purposes now, I would like to suggest that these works do not require cultural history to undermine the narrative mastery of events and the refusal, among mainstream Holocaust historians, to refuse to interpret that which remains opaque on the grounds that it is not possible or within our purview to do so. But they do require attention to Dan Stone's insistence that we must ask questions about what appears opaque and that we may require certain kinds of methodological tools other than those mainstream historiography currently employs. From this point of view, Dan Stone has done a remarkable job, introducing historians to the particular lacunae in their own work on the Holocaust and now, in calling for a return to ideology informed by theoretically inflected cultural history, he has made a daring and courageous proposal.

8 I thank Luiza Nader of the University of Warsaw for her explication of the differences between the Polish and English editions.