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Regarding History, Holocaust and Culture

Dan Stone's essay provides a very refreshing view of how the sub-discipline of cultural history connects and disconnects with the study of the Holocaust. Although he clearly presents the hegemonic dimensions of cultural history as a process of canon formation within the historical discipline, one possible and, in my view, problematic reading of its main focus would tend to encapsulate the discipline of history at large under the banner of cultural history. Subaltern studies, intellectual history, trauma and genocide studies or the new political history, for example are not necessarily encompassed by Peter Burke's seemingly reductive understanding of current historical trends.¹ In fact, it is not this genealogical cultural history that Stone is putting forward but rather the most pressing idea of incorporating cultural approaches to Holocaust studies, particularly but not exclusively in the field of German history. To put it bluntly, cultural history does not abound in Holocaust historiography. Part of the explanation for this meaningful absence is that as Stone points out, "it is striking that the historiography has remained far more traditional than in most other fields of history."²

Stone makes clear that cultural history has a great deal to say about the Holocaust. However, it seems to me that Stone's subtle arguments might also be read as transcending their explicit (and well taken) aim of adopting cultural history in Holocaust historiography. In other words, Stone's innovative approach could also be read as debating with certain historical approaches prevalent in the latter that disregard intellectual history and/or theoretically inclined approaches to the past. Many times cultural history is also part of this attack against theory and less often is not part of it. As Stone rightfully argues, the question of fantasy and sacrifice is central to the study of the Holocaust. Moreover, as Dominick LaCapra has demonstrated, historical approaches to the Holocaust would gain, for example, from the incorporation of theories of the self and sacrificialism (from Bataille, to Kristeva, to Girard).³ Trauma studies would also represent a necessary complement to the history of the Holocaust. Stone agrees with this need.

1 See Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge, 2004).

2 Dan Stone, "Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History," *Dapim*, this ed., P. 66.

3 See Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, 2004); *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, 2001); *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, 1998); *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, 1994).

However, many cultural historians would clearly reject these approaches by portraying themselves as defending history from theory.

Although many historians are turning away from traditional, structural approaches to the Holocaust, the non-critical adoption of the work of Raul Hilberg (and its demonization of theory) by many Holocaust historians suggests that many of them remain fixated on their historiographical past.⁴ The current turn to ideology and theory (and fantasy and discourse) is extremely important.

The turn to theory represents the cutting edge of Holocaust historiography, as Stone clearly argues. Intellectual historians like Dominick LaCapra, Saul Friedländer, Enzo Traverso, Omer Bartov and Dan Diner, for example, can be presented as participating of a theoretically inclined approach that in addition to interpreting texts in their ideological or social contexts, also stresses normative processes, meaning and power.⁵

Stone's proposal for the incorporation of a cultural history that assumes the interplay of context, fantasies and ideology especially, but perhaps not exclusively, with respect to the actions of perpetrators, is certainly timely. My reading of Stone's powerful and suggestive points does not oppose it to intellectual history but rather presents it as an opportunity for their mutual, analytical substantiation. There are some good examples of theoretically inclined historiography on the Holocaust that is equally empirically based and his article superbly enriches this historiography by emphasizing the need for a more integrative history of the Shoah. All in all, Stone presents an important contribution to Holocaust historiography. As he suggests, the construction of meaning takes us closer to the elusive "why" of the Holocaust. Stone's plea for broadening the spectrum of the history and theory of the Holocaust represents a necessary step in this direction.

4 On this topic see Federico Finchelstein, "The Holocaust Canon: Rereading Raul Hilberg," *New German Critique* 96 (2005 [June 2006]): 3–48.

5 In this context, the all-encompassing Italian collection on the Shoah with the participation of Saul Friedländer, Omer Bartov and Enzo Traverso among others, represents the most complete survey of the current state of Holocaust historiography: one that is highly attentive to culture, ideology and more generally meaning making within the Holocaust. See Marina Cattaruzza, Marcello Flores, Simon Levis Sullam and Enzo Traverso, eds., *Storia della Shoah: La crisi dell'Europa, lo sterminio degli ebrei e la memoria del XX secolo*, 5 vols. (Torino, 2005–2006).