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A Response to “Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History” by Dan Stone

Dan Stone’s article is an excellent attempt to help shape and in good part redirect the attention of historians in the study of the Holocaust, and it has implications for the study of other genocides and extreme events. Indeed the more general question it may serve to raise is that of how to address extreme or limit events involving violence and victimization? My observations should be read in the context of my overall appreciation of Stone’s argument and the specific indications he offers concerning what is now needed in the study of the Holocaust and, by implication, of other genocides and extreme or limit events and processes.

Stone’s encompassing framework is a plea for cultural history in its application and extension to work on the Holocaust. I wonder if this is too normalizing, broad, and porous an umbrella, as his own comments at times seem to indicate. Definitions of cultural history tend to be very encompassing and even vague, with their sweeping references to meaning, symbol, and inevitably, narrative. Especially in Geertzian terms, they invoke a rather literal textualist metaphor that presents all of culture as an analogy of the linguistic text, and the text is almost invariably read as a narrative or choreographed scenario on the model of the famed Balinese cock-fight. Narrative itself is often conflated with thick description, although narratologists distinguish between narrative (with a temporal dimension) and description (often understood in synchronic or spatialized terms). Moreover, the focus, if not fixation on narrative (often in its most conventional form) excludes or marginalizes the importance of other signifying practices which, like narrative itself, do not simply make meaning but have a variable, problematic relation to it: essay, poem, curse, chant, ritual, dance, list, and so forth—signifying practices where Bakhtin, Derrida, and others may be more pertinent, if at times difficult, guides than Geertz. “Thick description” itself is all-too-easily assimilated by historians as an analogue (if not simply a synonym) of context, just as Bourdieu’s “habitus” is readily understood as unself-conscious or routine practice and is even used to ward off other levels of analysis (notably ideological) as well as forms of critical self-reflection. The habitus of historians may at times not be very theory-friendly.

One might even be tempted at present to refer to the banality of cultural history and its prevalent commonplaces that may not provide the thought-

provoking impetus that Stone himself seeks. The insistence on cultural history, moreover, is already prompting a set of foreseeable reactions that lend themselves to very familiar forms of debate, almost amounting to set pieces with predictable, patterned moves. Typical of these are *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, edited by Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt¹ and *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, edited by Gabrielle Spiegel,² notably Spiegel's own plea for an admittedly patchwork "Practice Theory" (whose leitmotif seems to be, as in the case of Bonnell and Hunt, a call for a return to a refurbished social history). These initiatives are opposed to cultural history, which is conflated with a narrowly construed linguistic (or narrative) turn. Do we really need more overly familiar types of exchange in which a defense of what many now take to be a victorious cultural history provokes responses that pretend to provide new directions but which by and large follow long-prevailing winds? Could one at least put in a word for the typically marginalized kind of intellectual history that is not worshipfully fixated on "great texts" but looks to significant texts only insofar as they provide models of a critical-theoretical, rather than a predictably programmed approach to problems?

More provocative and potentially more pointed is Stone's insistence on a rethought concept of ideology that is alert to the role of fantasy (or the phantasmatic) in the construction or development of subjects in society and politics. Alon Confino's recent work has been useful here, as has been the work of others, although the role of psychoanalysis, rethought in a manner pertinent to historical inquiry, is not much in evidence in Confino or in many others. Even Saul Friedländer, in his justly acclaimed *Nazi Germany and the Jews*,³ tips his hat to the problem of transference in the introduction to his first volume but then does little with it—or with other psychoanalytic concepts—analytically, when he comes to the body of his text, perhaps in part because of the limitation of the documentary sources available to him.

Critics of the so-called linguistic and cultural turns have unfortunately not related the counter-turn to practice and even to habitus to unconscious processes and the role of such factors as the repetition compulsion, belatedness, and the uncanny return of the repressed (or disavowed) but instead conjoined it with an altogether unnecessary and misleading downplaying, if not neglect, of ideology. Habitus seems to amount to quasi-automatic behavior that results from training, habit, or indoctrination and is not explained further. At best, the account of motivation is simplistic, often amounting to a form of more or less distorted or self-defeating instrumental rationality with the distortions

- 1 Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, 1999). The book appears in a series entitled "New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture."
- 2 Gabrielle Spiegel, ed., *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York, 2005).
- 3 Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (New York, 1997).

and excessive developments left unexamined or unexplained. Ideology itself is often seen in excessively narrow terms, as systematic, fully articulated thought. The result of such an overly restricted conception of practice and habitus may well be a picture of society made up of Hegel at one extreme, thinking in the stratosphere, and robotic figures at the other extreme, who manipulate weapons, strategize for turf, deploy populations, and execute objectified enemies. Raul Hilberg's stress on the "machinery of destruction"⁴ may have prompted the latter extreme emphasis, as did one construction of Arendt's underdeveloped notion of the banality of evil. It is surprising how many approaches resonate with the "machinery of destruction" idea with its focus on impersonal processes, desk murder, and objectification of the Jew as other. This is not only a prevalent, even dominant emphasis of empirical history, as Stone intimates, but of approaches as otherwise diverse as those of Zygmunt Bauman, with his limited notion of modernity, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, with his turn to the Heideggerian *Gestell* or technological framework, and Giorgio Agamben, with his stress on an expansive notion of bio-power and his vastly influential ideas of homo sacer and analytically reduced, bare life.⁵ It is even prominent in one dimension of Horkheimer and Adorno's "dialectic of enlightenment" with its culmination in the reign of instrumental rationality or the fully administered society that somehow reverses itself "dialectically" into myth and barbarism.⁶ This emphasis is not altogether misguided, for the scientific, objectifying dimension of Nazism did exist, as did the image of the Jew as a pest or vermin to be exterminated in an instrumentally rational way. But, as Stone indicates, this emphasis, when dominant, is also one-sided and thus misleading, especially when pursued as the sole or exclusive mode of analysis or explanation.

An analysis of ideology, understood as having a crucial phantasmic dimension, does provide insight into the perception or construction of the Jew as quasi-ritual pollutant or contaminant in the *Volksgemeinschaft* whose elimination would bring sacrificial purification and even redemption or liberation—*Endlösung* as *Auslösung* and *Erlösung*.⁷ A key motivational factor here would be a refusal by the perpetrators to recognize or accept their own

4 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3 vols (New Haven, CT [1967], 2003).

5 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, 1989); Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics* (Cambridge, MA, 1990); Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York, 1999).

6 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York [1944], 1972).

7 Here the treatment of the animal as the radical other of the human, as well as the use of animal metaphors in vilifying and degrading humans, also deserves consideration, including the disposal of animals during the Holocaust. The animal/human opposition and the repeated yet varied quest for a phantasmatic decisive criterion separating human from animal is beginning to receive the attention it warrants. See, for example, Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapagoats, and the Holocaust* (New York, 2000).

vulnerability and a tendency to project the putative causes of anxiety or unsettlement onto scapegoated others.

Another, less reactive factor might well be a proclivity to act out destructive, deadly drives and even to feel exhilarated, however ambivalently, in and through the repeated enactment of violent scenes. One need not extend such a view to the entire German population, but it was, I think, a force that has fascinated many figures in the modern period (including Georges Bataille in a sometimes ecstatic or sublime vein involving identification with the sacrificial victim).⁸ I also think it was prominent in a committed elite that followed the leader, and it was accepted, more or less actively, or passively, by numerous others, both Germans and their collaborators or allies. It would be valuable to have more work in the archives sensitive to this dimension of the Holocaust, including the way other victim groups might, to a greater or lesser extent, be swept into a quasi-sacrificial, purifying, redemptive frame of reference, in good part through the dynamic of victimization and violence itself. Himmler's Posen speech and documents in "*The Good Old Days*"⁹ point to its role, as well as to the possibility of "sublime" exaltation in the annihilation of the victimized other.

A fruitful development Stone does not explore is the emergence of a non-normalizing, comparative approach to history in which the Holocaust is treated along with other forms of violence, at times involving genocide, notably with respect to colonialism, post-colonialism, slavery, and even the treatment of other animals (notably in factory farming and experimentation).¹⁰ This type of comparative history calls for an approach that is both differential and informed by a critical-theoretical animus that is concerned with the relation between the past and the present. A related point intimated but not pursued by Stone, is the way the downplaying of a rethought notion of ideology is itself bound up with a resistance to critical theory on the part of professional historians—or a tendency to learn enough about theory to be able to dismiss or downplay it in a more or less informed manner. I think the selections in Keith Jenkins' *Postmodern History Reader* attest to this point, in that they include both rather toned-down, if not blunted forms of critical theory (for example, not one but two essays by Gabrielle Spiegel) and a broadside against post-modernism and theory, nonetheless sympathetic to Spiegel, by Lawrence Stone.¹¹ In a related respect, the forays into theory by Richard J. Evans, whom Dan Stone also mentions, by and large resonate with the mainstream reaction of many professional historians and reinforce the

8 See Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl, with Carl R Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr., ed. with intro. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis, 1985).

9 Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess, eds., "*The Good Old Days*": *The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders*, foreword Hugh Trevor-Roper (New York [1988], 1991).

10 I touch upon these issues (including the human/animal relation) in my forthcoming *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca, 2009).

11 Keith Jenkins, ed., *A Postmodern History Reader* (London, 1997).

idea that critical-theoretical reflection is diversionary or irrelevant.¹²

One may indeed find that recent work by Agamben, Žižek, or Eric L. Santner goes in somewhat misleading directions that are “post-secular” gestures of questionable import, if not refurbished returns to political theology.¹³ But even they are worth reading in the attempt selectively to refine the kind of critical theory that has a mutually challenging relation to historical understanding and research. Near the end of his essay, Stone makes a reference to practitioners of the sort of critical theory that might have a mutually thought provoking relation to historiography. Yet he notes that

even the few historians in that list are historians with non-standard research interests and are unusually open to theory, especially trauma theory. In Germany, one could even argue that two distinct, scholarly enterprises have developed, one dealing with the empirical history of the Holocaust, one focusing on the aftermath and representation of the Shoah, and that the two barely interact.¹⁴

The point may be to make those “non-standard research interests” more prominent, especially to the extent that they enable greater refinement of modes of conceptualization and self-understanding, and to bring out (for example, in book reviews) when and how their avoidance results in mountains of empirical research piled on a molehill of often uncritical conceptuality. A further point would be to recognize that the empirical history of the Holocaust and the aftermath or representation of the Shoah are intimately related projects—indeed that historians themselves are among those living in that aftermath and have transferential relations to a past that will not pass away, which they have to engage in one way or another. Historians confront problems of representation that their professional expertise should enable them to address with a more thorough informational base than that found in the often rashly generalizing or trans-historical Agamben or Žižek as well as with a more pertinent sense of the way a mutually questioning interaction between history and theory could be to the benefit of both.

12 Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York, 1997).

13 See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago, 2005); and Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke/Benjamin/Sebald* (Chicago, 2006). See also the defense of Žižek’s trans-historical approach in Paul Eisenstein, *Traumatic Encounters: Holocaust Representation and the Hegelian Subject* (Albany, 2003) where my own work is misconstrued in terms of a narrowly historicizing particularism. Eisenstein’s book is brilliant, but it fails to see that a major problem is the elaboration of the kind of theory that has a close and mutually interactive relation to historical inquiry and does not simply “explain” historical phenomena by an appeal to trans-historical forces such as the encounter with the Lacanian “real.”

14 Dan Stone, “Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History,” *Dapim*, this ed., P. 67.