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Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History

At a recent talk at the Institute for Historical Research of the University of London, Peter Burke, Britain's leading proponent of cultural history, reflected on the problems that had arisen as a result of cultural history's success.[1] These, according to Burke, are five in number, though naturally they overlap.

The first is the very success of cultural history: its ubiquity tends towards the disintegration of the discipline. If cultural history is so widely practiced, then the question is no longer how to convince people of the validity of its claims or how to persuade people to engage with it, but "what is **not** cultural history?" The second is the idea that cultural history constitutes a turn in historical thought. Where we have had linguistic, visual, bodily, material, narrative and performative turns, now we must add a "cultural historical turn" to the list. The implication, presumably, is that if there is a "turn" there will sooner or later be a "turn against." Cultural history is obviously, in Burke's eyes, too valuable to be so subject to the whims of intellectual fashion. The third problem is a related one, that of pluralism. By this Burke means the problem of determining the field. Diversity is a good thing, but at what point does it become disunity and incoherence? The fourth relates to the fear that the historical arena will be dominated by cultural history with the resulting loss of other forms of explanation. If cultural history becomes the dominant paradigm for historians, what will become of economic or political forms of explaining the past? Here Burke signals a fear of reductionism, but where practitioners of cultural history might have levelled that accusation against, say, political historians, in the past, now Burke fears that the charge might apply to cultural historians. Finally, and somewhat surprisingly—though related to the issue of reductionism—Burke suggested that the cultural constructivism inherent in cultural history carries the danger that it might lead historians to embrace extreme voluntarism, leaving no place for social facts.

These are serious problems, suggesting that it may indeed be time to take stock of what cultural history has achieved and where it might be heading in the future. In this article I use the example of historiography of the Holocaust

1 Peter Burke, "Strengths and Weaknesses of Cultural History, 1980–2006," (paper presented at the Philosophy of History Seminar, Institute for Historical Research, University of London, 1 March 2007).

in order to respond to Burke's challenge and to offer some thoughts on the as yet unfulfilled promises, as well as the limits of cultural history. In order to do so meaningfully, I will start with some thoughts on how to define cultural history.

According to Burke, cultural history is the writing of history from a symbolic point of view, a rather vague definition that is meant to suggest both its strong and weak points. Cultural history, so Burke says, encourages the writing of history with proper emphasis on the various ways of being human.

What does this mean? Surely all history deals with various ways of being human? Clearly, we need to consider what Burke means by "writing history from a symbolic point of view."[2] The use of the term "symbolic" suggests that cultural history takes much of its inspiration from anthropology, especially from American, symbolic anthropology, which seeks to explain culture as a set of shared meanings. The work of Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner and David Schneider, especially, aims to resist scientism or positivism and to emphasise cultural particularism.[3] Examining rituals and symbols, the anthropologist set out to decode symbols that are key to a particular group and thus to provide detailed meaning. Historians have for the last thirty years or so been attracted to this approach, not only because it suggests a way of interpreting past societies through previously unused sources but because it suggests a reinterpretation of the past, re-describing well known facts or events in ways that are new but nevertheless recognisably historical: "thick description," Geertz's watchword, is an immediately comprehensible idea for an historian.[4]

In cultural history, the historian's narrative or analysis is based on interpreting symbols, that is to say aspects of a society that stand for something else and that provide focal points for the functioning of and, hence, understanding of that society. Although more recently, anthropologists have complicated this picture by suggesting that the scholarly text is also part of symbolic discourse, or by claiming that much of culture is inaccessible to language, the stress on the symbolic has been responsible for some of the most innovative work in history over the last few decades, especially history of the medieval and early-modern periods.

Cultural history is different from intellectual history because it does not merely interpret texts in their ideological or social context. Rather, it seeks to show how meanings in society are made manifest in power relations, for example, as expressed in gender, racial or class relations. "Culture," as Miri Rubin puts it, "was the site where relations of power could very readily be

2 For a discussion, see Lynn Hunt, "Introduction: History, Culture, and Text," *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1989) 12.

3 I am greatly indebted here to, and borrow some formulations from Jonathan Spencer, "Symbolic Anthropology," *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, eds. Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer (London, 2002) 535–539.

4 Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpetive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London [1973], 1993) 3–30.

discerned."[5] This approach can and usually does involve the study of texts, but also of ritual, memory and other forms of social practice. Most significant of all, it focuses on the body—of the individual in different communities and in relation to the state. Cultural history seeks, as Rubin puts it, "to read symbols in clusters of meaning, in contexts of use, in cases of meaningful practice, through texts and the artefacts of varying genres and texture."[6] As I will explain later, then, in the context of the Holocaust, cultural history means more than the study of Nazi ideology.

Carolyn Dean has written of Michael Rothberg's book, *Traumatic Realism*, that its method renders "the incommensurability of historical knowledge and its representation a permanent dimension of that history."[7] This articulation also captures to some extent the aim of cultural history: to understand the past in the manner of all historical endeavor (hence "realism"), but doing so through a self-reflexive awareness that access to the past is always mediated through the historian's own "informed subjectivity, human and intellectual capacities for categorization, system-building and empathy" and the "wishes, pain, hope and desire" that the historian brings to the past.[8]

Considering the various ways of being human, writing the history of the Holocaust presents a special challenge: the "inhumanity" of the perpetrator, as the oft-used and inappropriate platitude has it (inappropriate not because the perpetrators' actions were not horrendous but because they reveal an unwelcome aspect of the human condition) is one problem, the multiple experiences of the victims another. It is possible, though sadly rare, to try and combine perpetrator and victim history in a single narrative, as has been done in the most accomplished fashion by Saul Friedländer in his recently completed, two volume *Nazi Germany and the Jews*.[9] But doing so does not necessarily entail writing cultural history. Indeed, most historians of the Holocaust would find the de-emphasis on political history intolerable, even those writing, say, about music in the ghettos: one has to understand the circumstances in which the victims found themselves and this necessitates political history of a sort. The key point here is that although Jews were not simply passive victims, as an older stereotype had it, nevertheless their fate was ultimately out of their hands. As the minutes from the Białystok *Judenrat* (Jewish council) record, in an important corrective to those who regard

5 Miri Rubin, "What is Cultural History Now?" *What is History Now?* ed. David Cannadine (Basingstoke, 2002) 84.

6 Ibid. 85.

7 Carolyn J. Dean, "History and Holocaust Representation," *History and Theory* 41 (2002): 247. The article is a review of Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis, 2000).

8 Rubin 81.

9 Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution 1933–39* (London, 1997); Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939–1945: The Years of Extermination* (New York, 2007).

the *Judenräte* as complicit in the Jews' destruction, "We are a state without finances, without budgets, without gold reserves. . . . The decisions will not after all be made by the *Judenrat*, nor by the Executive Board. The Germans will settle things."[10] The question of agency, or the lack of it, that is central here suggests that political history, with its stress on power relations, rather than cultural history, provides the most appropriate way of understanding the position of the Jews under Nazi rule. Thus the first thing we note in this context is that Burke's claim about the all-pervasiveness of cultural history is not true of Holocaust historiography. Since this is no longer the marginal branch of historiography that it was just two decades ago, it is worth considering why cultural history has as yet failed to have any significant influence on historians of the Holocaust.

Rather than proceed on a negative note, however, we should perhaps start by acknowledging, indeed welcoming, the impressive impact that cultural history has had on the history of World War II, for example in the recent volume *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini*, edited by Robert Gildea et al.[11] This approach marks a welcome addition to the historiography, which remains otherwise dominated by military history. We should say the same for the war's aftermath, about which we now have a plethora of studies devoted to post-war memory, consumerism, gender, the body and so on, in the context of the emerging Cold War.[12] Most significantly, cultural history has had a major impact on the writing of modern German history. In *Pain and Prosperity*, a volume edited by Paul Betts and Greg Eghigian, modern German history is reinterpreted through the symbolic lenses of pain, memory, modernity, childbirth, sacrifice, prosperity, scarcity and nostalgia. In *The Work of Memory*, edited by Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, modern German memory is analysed, not through memorials and other *lieux de mémoire*, as has become customary in memory studies, but through power relations in society, for example, the role of industrialists, medicine and literature.[13] A noticeably

10 From the minute book of the Białystok *Judenrat*, 2 November 1941, *A Holocaust reader*, ed. Lucy S. Dawidowicz (West Orange, NJ, 1976) 282–283.

11 Robert Gildea, Olivier Wieviorka and Annette Waring, eds., *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini: Daily Life in Occupied Europe* (Oxford, 2006).

12 Among many others, see for example István Deák, Jan T. Gross and Tony Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and its Aftermath* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe During the 1940s and 1950s* (Cambridge, 2003); Hanna Schissler, ed., *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949–1968* (Princeton, NJ, 2001); Uli Linke, *German Bodies: Race and Representation after Hitler* (New York, 1999).

13 Paul Betts and Greg Eghigian, eds., *Pain and Prosperity: Reconsidering Twentieth-Century German History* (Stanford, CA, 2003); Alon Confino, Paul Betts and Dirk Schumann, eds., *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York, 2008); Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, eds., *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* (Urbana, 2002). See also Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton, NJ, 2003); Frank

burgeoning area of German cultural history is landscape and environmental history, with works by David Blackbourn, Thomas Lekan, Frank Uekoetter and others—notably from cultural geography—on conservation, forestry and the symbolic role of landscape.[14] The current mass of works on post-war consumerism and, especially on gender, are also largely outgrowths of cultural history.

Alon Confino writes that "the goal is to write a history of twentieth-century Germany whereby the disciplinary techniques of the state and the making of the self interact."[15] This is a statement that can only have been made at the end of a long development of cultural history, such that its exponents feel confident in its achievements and can see the merits of bringing it into relationship with political history. Confino is an exemplary practitioner of the genre, with his analyses of local symbolism, especially his studies of Württemberg, of the idea of *Heimat*, and of tourism, and the ways in which they interact with national narratives. This goes beyond merely juxtaposing the history of sensibilities or emotions with the history of the state, but involves bringing cultural history into the heart of modern German history, in a way vindicating Peter Burke's claim about the centrality of the genre.

But to what extent has cultural history influenced writing of the history of the Holocaust? They are not exactly the same thing, but the post-modernist turn is deeply indebted to developments in Holocaust historiography, and contributions such as Saul Friedländer's *Probing the Limits of Representation*

Biess, Mark Roseman and Hanna Schissler, eds., *Conflict, Catastrophe, and Continuity: Essays on Modern German History* (New York, 2007).

14 Raymond H. Dominick, *The Environmental Movement in Germany: Prophets and Pioneers, 1871-1971* (Bloomington, 1992); Axel Goodbody, ed., *The Culture of German Environmentalism: Anxieties, Visions, Realities* (New York, 2002); Thomas Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature: Landscape Preservation and German Identity, 1885-1945* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc and Thomas Zeller, eds., *How Green were the Nazis? Nature, Environment and Nation in the Third Reich* (Athens, OH, 2005); Thomas Lekan and Thomas Zeller, eds., *Germany's Nature: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental History* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2005); David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany* (New York, 2006); Frank Uekoetter, *The Green and the Brown: A History of Conservation in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, 2006). For a useful overview see David Motadel, "The German Nature Conservation Movement in the Twentieth Century," *Journal of Contemporary History* 43 (2008): 137–153. The work of Karen E. Till exemplifies the cultural geographers' work on this subject. See Karen E. Till, "Reimagining National Identity: 'Chapters of Life' at the German Historical Museum in Berlin," *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies*, eds. Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher and Karen E. Till (Minneapolis, 2003) 273–299; Karen E. Till, "Construction Sites and Showcases: Mapping 'The New Berlin' through Tourism Practices," *Mapping Tourism*, eds. Stephen P. Hanna and Vincent J. Del Casino Jr. (Minneapolis, 2001) 51–77; "Places of Memory," *A Companion to Political Geography*, eds. John Agnew, Katharyne Mitchell and Gerard Toal (Oxford, 2003), 289–301; *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* (Minneapolis, 2005).

15 Alon Confino, *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance: Promises and Limits of Writing History* (Chapel Hill, 2006) 212.

(1992)—which includes Hayden White's much-discussed essay "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth"—are also contributions to wider debates about the nature of history writing, which is why Keith Jenkins includes several excerpts from the book in his *Postmodern History Reader*.[16] Furthermore, it is very striking that within debates about theory, the Holocaust is often appealed to as a definitive test case.

For example, in an article attacking what he sees as the dying legacy of post-modern philosophy of history, Perez Zagorin implies that he is driving the nail into the coffin by noting an apparent inability of the post-modernists to respond to Holocaust deniers:

> Historians of the Holocaust in particular have been disquieted by the assertion that historical facts are products of discourse, not true evidence of an antecedent reality, and that past events may be emplotted in any way a historian might choose. As [Roger] Chartier has noted, there seems to be no basis under [Hayden] White's view for invoking the facts of the historical record to refute the rewriting of history in revisionist narratives which allege that the Holocaust is a myth invented by Zionist propaganda and that the death camps and the gas chambers never existed.[17]

From the opposite point of view, it has been argued that historical relativism need not lead to helplessness in the face of Holocaust deniers:

> Another important example of historians' commitment to the quest for a single, best interpretation is the debate about how to textualise the enormity of the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis' "Final Solution". . . . As these searches for the best Great Story of the Holocaust—whether focused on intentions or on Germanness, Europeanness, and humanness—demonstrate, acknowledged facts are not enough to guarantee a single best interpretation. To admit such interpretive diversity, however, is not to endorse the so-called revisionist denial of the acknowledged historical facts. Rather, it shows that these facts can be admitted and still not provide a definitive (con)textualization of the set of events colligated by the term [Holocaust].[18]

16 Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, MA, 1992); Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader* (London, 1997).

17 Perez Zagorin, "History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now," *History and Theory* 38 (1999): 19–20. See also Berel Lang, "Is It Possible to Misrepresent the Holocaust?" *History and Theory* 34 (1995): 84–89, for a similar argument.

18 Robert J. Berkhofer Jr., *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, MA, 1995) 49. This point of view stands in direct opposition to that of Chris Lorenz, who writes that "[a]s soon as the 'fragmentation' of historiography leads to—and is legitimated by—epistemological scepticism, a healthy pluralism has given way to an unhealthy relativism." See Chris Lorenz, "Comparative Historiography: Problems and Perspectives", *History and Theory* 38 (1999): 25. See also Lorenz's comments at the end of his "Model Murderers: Afterthoughts on the Goldhagen Method and History," *Rethinking History* 6 (2002): 146. For some of the best considerations of historical narration in relation to the Holocaust, see Dan Diner, *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism, and the Holocaust* (Berkeley, CA, 2000).

These are just a few examples of the kind of statement with which most students of philosophy of history will be familiar, and can easily be multiplied. Rather than do so here, I want just to note the curious fact that whilst the Holocaust has often been the argument of last resort in theoretical debates about post-modernism, representation, or cultural history, the history of the Holocaust in the narrow sense, appears to be quite resistant to such ideas. It is this disjunction that I want to account for here, and to show how cultural history is finally and valuably starting to make inroads into how the history of the Holocaust is written.

First, then, we should pause to reconsider what it is that cultural history seeks to do. Even granting that it has become central to the discipline, as Burke argues, how much of what passes for cultural history actually conforms to some of its basic assumptions? Anne Kane, in a useful article published in *History and Theory*, makes some basic methodological statements about cultural history that are worth bearing in mind. Students of "culture" are familiar with the debates amongst theorists of cultural history as to whether culture counts as structure or practice, as well as with older debates about what is actually meant by "culture," from the sense, now usually regarded as elitist, proposed by Matthew Arnold, that culture constitutes the finer aspects of a society, its art, music and literature, to the supposedly post-modern notion that culture is everything that makes up a society, a position often associated with Clifford Geertz and self-reflexive anthropology. Kane writes that instead of the "culture as structure / culture as practice" conundrum, we should place more emphasis on the "recursivity of meaning, agency and structure—or more specifically, the mutual transformation of social structure, social action, and cultural systems—in historical transformation."[19] This statement appears to be saying that instead of a synchronic analysis of culture, *à la* Levi-Strauss,[20] we should see culture historically, and think about its role in historical transformation, which to an historian seems eminently sensible. One thinks here of Marshall Sahlins' claim, in *Islands of History*, that the combination of event and structure **is** history, an argument that allows for the transformation of culture to take place, but within certain parameters defined by what a culture can and cannot comprehend.[21] This ties in with Kane's comments that "the foundation underlying the reciprocity of social action, social structuring, and the reproduction and transformation of cultural systems, is meaning construction, the process of using cultural models to make sense of experience" and that "meaning structure and meaning construction together form the

19 Anne Kane, "Reconstructing Culture in Historical Explanation: Narratives as Cultural Structure and Practice," *History and Theory* 39 (2000): 311.

20 See Kamala Visweswaran, "The Interventions of Culture: Claude Lévi-Strauss, Race, and the Critique of Historical Time," *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Sybol Cook (Bloomington, 2003) 227–248.

21 Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985), especially 155: "culture is precisely the organization of the current situation in the terms of a past."

basis for cultural explanation in historical processes." The best way to uncover meaning in cultural models, Kane asserts, is "to study the 'active' component of culture structures, namely narrative," because narratives are where cultural meanings are metaphorically embodied, are the first place people turn for interpreting experience, and are thus "configurations of meaning, through which an individual and/or community comes to understand itself."[22] In order to study the Holocaust through the lens of cultural history, then, we would want to examine how meaning construction, understood through the narratives that individuals and groups understand themselves, both shaped and was transformed by the event of the genocide.

On this basis, one's initial suspicion might well be that very few aspects of Holocaust historiography can be seen as cultural history. First of all, on a somewhat emotional level, if cultural history seeks to explain the transformation of meaning, how can it respond to an event that is often said to be fundamentally meaningless, or that shatters all established methodologies; as thinkers as diverse as Hannah Arendt and Jean-François Lyotard have suggested? But even if we bracket off this discussion—which takes us into the realms of aesthetics and ethics—if cultural history seeks "to make social and economic structures become utterly malleable entities in the web of signs and symbols" such that it would "end the longstanding subjugation of history to the material side of life," as Ernst Breisach understands it,[23] can Holocaust historiography be considered cultural history? How many historical studies of the Holocaust could be considered to "share a distrust or at least a distaste for histories of a linear type," another of cultural history's characteristics, according to Breisach?[24] Still, despite this obvious lack of fit, I will suggest in what follows that although Holocaust historiography shows that Peter Burke's claim about the ubiquity of cultural history does not apply in all cases, nevertheless there are areas of the discipline where cultural history methods have been quite influential. In general, this influence has increased the more historians of the Holocaust turn away from the dominant, structuralist interpretation of the 1980s and 1990s and towards a renewed emphasis on what, for the moment, I will designate with the shorthand "ideology."

Before proceeding further, however, it is important to note, especially in the Israeli context, where the structuralist interpretation never gained the following that it did in Europe or in the US, that this emphasis on ideology does not mean a return to a naive intentionalism. As put forward by historians such as Lucy Dawidowicz, intentionalism argues not merely that the Holocaust was the logical outcome of antisemitism but that Hitler and the Nazi elite had a plan to kill the Jews long before it was realized, as early, in some versions of

22 Kane 312, 314, 315.

23 Ernst Breisach, *On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and its Aftermath* (Chicago, 2003) 144.

24 Ibid. 148.

the argument, as 1919 or 1925. Nor does it necessarily support (though it need not stand in contradiction to the findings of) a "modified intentionalism" as represented by, for example, Philippe Burrin or Jeffrey Herf.[25] These historians recognise that there was in fact no preconceived plan to murder Europe's Jews and that the decision-making process was ad hoc and reactive but they place these structuralist claims in a framework of overarching antisemitism within the Third Reich, so that antisemitic ideology—understood almost as an agent in its own right—was ultimately the driving force of the Holocaust. This modified intentionalism, then, has the tendency to be not very modified at all. Cultural history differs from the structuralist approach because it places a strong emphasis on the world of ideas, symbols and narratives. And it differs from intentionalism because it is not an argument concerned primarily with reconstructing the chronology of the decision-making process for the "Final Solution," but a way of understanding the world of meanings that allowed the idea of the "Final Solution" to emerge as an option for the Third Reich's leaders. Equally, where the history of the Holocaust's victims is concerned, cultural history permits not just a reconstruction of the experiences of the Jews, but a way of trying to understand how their experiences were given meaning, or, as one might expect, were opaque to meaning-production.

Let us take some examples, all of which draw upon what can be seen in the broadest sense as an anthropological sensibility, to try and grapple with the nature of Nazism and the occurrence of the Holocaust, an occurrence which, taking Kane strictly at her word, might be considered to be incomprehensible since its victims had no culturally-accepted narratives through which they could make sense of what was happening. (Although there are some who argue to the contrary, the majority of scholars consider it a paradox that throughout the persecution, the Jewish victims used established narratives to try and provide meaning for what was happening, with the result that they all fell short of the task, even if many diarists and chroniclers did formulate penetrating insights into Nazism's hatred of the Jews.[26])

A good example is the work that has been done to try and understand the nature of Nazism. There is of course a risk in such study, in that one has to share a mental space with the thing one is studying, but it is a necessary risk, as some brave—and very disparate—thinkers such as Aurel Kolnai, Georges Bataille and R.G. Collingwood understood in the 1930s.[27] From

25 Philippe Burrin, *Nazi Antisemitism: From Prejudice to the Holocaust*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York, 2005); Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

26 Cf. David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1984); David G. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington, 1999).

27 Dan Stone, *Responses to Nazism in Britain 1933–1939: Before War and Holocaust* (Basingstoke, 2003) 17–44; Dan Stone, "Anti-fascist Europe Comes to Britain: Theorising Fascism as a Contribution to Defeating it," *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-war Period*, eds.

the point of view of cultural history, the Nazi self-description of "thinking with the blood" could not be more symbolic. Here we see what Kane means by the transformation of narratives that contain symbolic meanings with regard to how the world should be interpreted. With its critiques of Weimar degeneracy, materialism and rationalism, Nazism overturned established narratives and replaced them with mythical narratives of authentic, Teutonic belonging based on racial homogeneity, the struggle against "the Jew," and the creation of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. It is no doubt true, as those who have protested against the so-called "voluntaristic turn" in the historiography of the Third Reich have stressed (most notably Richard Evans), that most Germans were not ideologically committed and that their everyday lives were taken up with mundane matters such as obtaining food and shelter. Yet, bearing in mind Charles Maier's important comment that "What are morally significant are the few institutions that were murderous, not the normal aspects of running a society,"[28] it is worth remembering that what recent scholarship has shown is, first, that the institutions that were "murderous" were more numerous than historians have long thought and second, that even if not outright conspiracy theorists, most Germans during the Hitler years subscribed more or less willingly to the dictates of the regime, that is, allowed themselves to be *gleichgeschaltet* ("co-ordinated").[29]

The "return of ideology" in Holocaust historiography, then, represents a general trend away from the 1980s' structuralist consensus reliant on a social science approach and a turn toward symbolic, anthropological modes of thinking. As already indicated above, by "return of ideology" is meant not an attempt to rehabilitate a simplistic Goldhagen-type mono-causal approach,[30] but rather detailed empirical research into the role played by the professions and academic disciplines, from anthropologists to astrophysicists—and even, belatedly, historians; antisemitic research institutes; military education

Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz (Basingstoke, forthcoming 2009).

28 Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA, 1988) 96.

29 See, among many studies, Aurel Kolnai, *The War Against the West* (London, 1938); Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, trans. and ed. Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell (Columbia, 1999); Sebastian Haffner, *Germany Jekyll and Hyde* (London [1940], 2005); Fred Weinstein, *The Dynamics of Nazism: Leadership, Ideology, and the Holocaust* (New York, 1980); Peter Longerich, *"Davon haben wir nichts gewusst!" Die Deutschen und die Judenverfolgung 1933-1945* (Munich, 2006); Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).

30 See Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London, 1996). Apart from those who engaged in debate with Goldhagen (Christopher Browning, Ruth Bettina Birn, Norman Finkelstein), the best analysis of Goldhagen's book and the debate that it spawned is Dirk A. Moses, "Structure and Agency in the Holocaust: Daniel J. Goldhagen and His Critics," *History and Theory* 37 (1998): 194–219. To Israeli readers it will not be necessary to point out why Goldhagen's book met with a lukewarm response in comparison with the reception it received elsewhere, especially in Germany and the US.

programmes; wartime propaganda; Nazi ethics; the "ideological roots of Nazism" in religion, *völkisch* thought and so on; the Hitler Youth; and the social make-up of perpetrator agencies such as the SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*), the WVHA (*Wirtschaftsverwaltungshauptamt*), RSHA (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*) and the RuSHA (*Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt*).[31]

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. It has become a truism that no matter how sophisticated the historian's approach and no matter how subtle the historian's writing, "an opaqueness remains at the very core of the historical understanding and interpretation of what happened," as Friedländer notes;[32] rightly so, we might add. But that is not meant in the quasi-mystical way used by thinkers as diverse as Elie Wiesel and Maurice Blanchot. Rather, I mean that no single historical approach will take us to the heart of the matter, as Carolyn Dean's response to Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism* cited above indicates (see note 7). Nevertheless, I would argue that here, the real contribution of cultural history to Holocaust history is only just beginning to be made. The most significant contribution to this emerging approach, which stands on the shoulders of giants but which seeks to turn away from the focus on the politics of decision-making that remains the mainstay of the literature, is that made, unsurprisingly, by a scholar who has already established himself as one of the foremost practitioners of German cultural history: Alon Confino. In an article in *History & Memory* in

31 See, for example, Alan Steinweis, *Studying the Jew: Scholarly Antisemitism in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Isabel Heinemann, *"Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut: Das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen, 2003); Michael H. Kater, *Das "Ahnenerbe" der SS 1935-1945: Ein Beitrag zur Kulturpolitik des Dritten Reiches* (Munich, 2006); Michael H. Kater, *Doctors Under Hitler* (Chapel Hill [1989], 2000); Michael H. Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); Michael Wildt, *Generation der Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg, 2002); Michael Thad Allen, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill, 2002); Ute Deichmann, *Biologists Under Hitler* (Cambridge, MA, 1996); Margit Szöllösi-Janze, ed., *Science in the Third Reich* (Oxford, 2001); Jürgen Matthäus et al., *Ausbildungsziel Judenmord? "Weltanschauliche Erziehung" von SS, Polizei und Waffen-SS im Rahmen der "Endlösung"* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003). On historians see Nicholas Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker: Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen, 2003); Ingo Haar, *Historiker im Nationalsozialismus: Die deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft und der "Volkstumskampf" im Osten* (Göttingen, 2000); Winfried Schulze and Otto Gerhard Oexle, eds., *Deutsche Historiker im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999); Götz Aly, *Macht Geist Wahn: Kontinuitäten deutschen Denkens* (Berlin, 1997); Peter Schöttler, *Geschichtsschreibung als Legitimationswissenschaft 1918-1945* (Frankfurt am Main, 1997). For an excellent discussion see Konrad Jarausch, "Unasked Questions: The Controversy about Nazi Collaboration among German Historians," *Lessons and Legacies, VI: New Currents in Holocaust Research*, ed. Jeffrey Diefendorf (Evanston, IL, 2004) 190–208.

32 Saul Friedländer, "The 'Final Solution': On the Unease in Historical Interpretation," *History, Memory, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington, 1993) 103.

2005, Confino set out what promises to be a major line of investigation into the cultural assumptions underpinning the Holocaust.

Confino's argument is clearly and provocatively laid out, beginning with this assertion:

> we cannot understand why the Nazis persecuted and exterminated the Jews unless we are ready to explore... Nazi fantasies, hallucinations, and imagination. The campaign against the Jews was based on and motivated by fantasies about the Jews as the eternal and mortal enemy of humanity, and about the historic need to either exterminate the Jews or perish.[33]

This is a claim that is of a piece with the "return of ideology" that I have outlined, and it is also one, as Confino recognises, that accords with a commonsense understanding of the Holocaust; that is, that it must have been motivated by hatred of Jews (not, it is important to stress, by any means an uncontested claim in the historiography). It breaks with the rational approach signalled implicitly in much functionalist scholarship and especially in the scholarship of those who see the Holocaust as primarily driven by economic factors, such as Götz Aly.[34] Confino builds on Saul Friedländer's notion of "redemptive antisemitism" and on George Mosse's pioneering work from the 1960s onwards.[35] But he notes, quite rightly, that by comparison with the explosion of cultural history in German history, many of Mosse's ideas about sexuality, symbolism, myth and racism have not been integrated into Holocaust history: "It is as if debates in Holocaust historiography are isolated from major methodological trends in the historiography of German society and culture," he writes.[36] This is an argument that I put forward in my book *Constructing the Holocaust* (2003), that the extermination of the Jews should be approached not through the lens of rational calculus, decision-making procedures or bureaucracy, but through that of non-pragmatic, redemptive fantasies:

33 Alon Confino, "Fantasies about the Jews: Cultural Reflections on the Holocaust," *History and Memory* 17 (2005): 297.

34 See especially Götz Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005). For more subtle statements about the significance of economic motivations, especially theft, in the murder of the Jews, see Jonathan Petropoulos, "The Nazi Kleptocracy: Reflections on Avarice and the Holocaust," *Lessons and Legacies, VII: The Holocaust in International Perspective*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Evanston, IL, 2006) 29–38; Frank Bajohr, "Cliques, Corruption, and Organized Self-Pity: The Nazi Movement and the Property of the Jews," *Lessons and Legacies, VII: The Holocaust in International Perspective*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Evanston, IL, 2006) 39–49; Frank Bajohr, "Robbery, Ideology, and Realpolitik: Some Critical Remarks," *Yad Vashem Studies* 35 (2007): 179–191.

35 Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*; George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York, 1964); *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich* (New York, 1966); *Germans and Jews: The Right, the Left, and the Search for a "Third Force" in Pre-Nazi Germany* (London, 1971); *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (Detroit, 1987).

36 Confino 2005, 297.

> it does not necessitate the existence of a plan to murder the Jews, a canard which has long exercised Holocaust historiography. Rather, the role of fantasy bound up in the idea of redemption through murder is sufficient to account for the desire to murder the Jews without requiring that historians find a signed document setting out such a plan. … This is a significant step in a field of historiography which has traditionally been reluctant to deviate from the archival material left by the Nazis, and signals a new desire to take ideas in the past seriously.[37]

Confino's point accords with Kane's argument about what cultural history is, in that he seeks to show that Nazi ideology transformed German culture, so that even if, as he notes, ideology does not represent reality and experience in a straight forward way, yet "an element in Nazi antisemitism that should be interpreted as the history of representations, memory and symbolic meanings" does provide insights into how Nazi culture functioned.[38]

Where Confino is most forthright is in his claim that his cultural historical approach offers something that traditional methodologies cannot:

> Ultimately, all those who attempt to understand the Holocaust as caused by institutional and policy making processes inherent in the Nazi system of government, by the inner logic of National Socialist policies geared toward resettlement and expansion, or by the need to solve immediate local pragmatic problems (such as food problems)—that is, all attempts that fundamentally underplay the beliefs and values embedded in the acts of the perpetrators—are bound to end in an interpretative cul-de-sac.[39]

In my opinion, the benefits of cultural history complement rather than supersede other historical approaches—historiography would be all the poorer without analyses such as Adam Tooze's, for example[40]—but Confino is nevertheless right to say that cultural history, with its emphasis on fantasy, violence and Nazi narratives of meaning construction, takes us closer to understanding the all elusive "why?" than do studies of day-by-day decision-making, no matter how detailed.

Other keywords that have recently come to the fore in Holocaust historiography include: violence, blood ritual, sacrifice, and fantasy. While study of the impact of eugenics and racial science remains important, Confino is right when he says that "[t]he description of biological racism as represented in sober and objective language seems insufficient to account for a topic whose essence was inner demons and hallucinations."[41] A quick glance

37 Dan Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust: A Study in Historiography* (London, 2003) 164, cited in Confino, "Fantasies" 307.
38 Confino, "Fantasies" 309.
39 Ibid. 302.
40 Adam Tooze, *Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London, 2006).
41 Confino, "Fantasies" 310.

at the writings of the Nazis' favourite race theorists, Hans F. K. Günther, Houston Stewart Chamberlain and others proves this to be true, as does the fact that ultimately, the regime fell out with many of the race scientists, as their awkward academic hair-splitting meant that they often contradicted the basic racial propaganda messages of the Third Reich.[42] Even the writings of scientists such as Eugen Fischer or Otmar von Verschuer, though they generally steer clear of the mystical statements found in Günther and Chamberlain, take as their premise ideas about race that cannot be proven scientifically. As the race-philosopher Ernst Krieck put it:

> For real spiritual life does not exit in a vacuum, nor in a professor's study, nor through ignoring natural reality, but precisely through what Thomas Mann in his destructive work called the *Politisierung des Geistes*. . . . Only the conquest of the spirit by the force of the regime, of policy, and also by physical force will set the spirit in its real place, which is in civilizations and not in spiritual abstract culture. The purpose of the spirit is to serve the race, the state, and, as Alfred Bäumler said, the spirit is to be encompassed in the totality of racialism (*Arteigenheit*, *Artgleichheit*). . . . the time for humanism and liberalism has passed and . . . nowadays blood and race are the place upon which man attains a consciousness of himself and thus freedom. Race and blood are unavoidable primeval forces with primeval power (*Urzwang*), and in accepting the yoke of these forces man is liberated from enslavement to reason, logic, and other sterile forms of the human spirit.[43]

Or, even more explicitly:

> The scientific system of Eugen Fischer, according to which hereditary characteristics should be considered the motive force of history, is the key to understanding the value of the individual. And there are scientists in the world rising to disagree with the possibility of proving the existence of race scientifically. However we have learned from Chamberlain's and especially from the Führer's teachings that the verification of the existence of race, and perhaps of existence in general, does not require artificial scientific tools. . . . The fact of the existence of race is not doubtful, because man carries it in his heart, his spirit, his soul, or because man wants race to become a fact.[44]

42 See Christopher M. Hutton, *Race and the Third Reich: Linguistics, Racial Anthropology and Genetics in the Dialectic of Volk* (Cambridge, 2005), especially 139: "there was never any question of the Party and state authorities yielding their final authority in such matters to purely scholarly criteria... The regime increasingly sought to keep academic and scholarly discussion of race separate from race propaganda in the public sphere."

43 Ernst Krieck, "Die Intellektuellen und das Dritte Reich," 1938 lecture, cited in Uriel Tal, "Violence and the Jew in Nazi Ideology". In *Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Third Reich: Selected Essays* (London, 2004) 6–7.

44 Ibid. 9. On the distinction in Verschuer's work between "scientific" and "antisemitic" studies see Eric Ehrenreich, "Otmar von Verschuer and the 'Scientific' Legitimization of Nazi Anti-Jewish Policy," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 21 (2007): 55–72.

This passage reminds us that Confino is building on the works of earlier scholars, notably Uriel Tal, George Mosse, Léon Poliakov, Norman Cohn and Joshua Trachtenberg, whose writings sought to show that the "deep psychology"—for want of a better term—of the Holocaust is to be found not in the perpetrators' own emphasis on their rationality and professionalism, but in their "fantasies about the Jews," which are bound up with and inseparable from the sober, technical and professional language of science and modernity.[45] Whilst such works focus on antisemitic stereotypes and traditions, especially in Germany, they do not do so under the rubric of "cultural history"; the difference between them and today's studies is that these earlier works are essentially contributions to the "intentionalist" understanding of Hitler's and the Nazis' world view, and that recent research, as I have indicated, focuses on German society and culture more broadly.

Can any of this be seen as according with cultural historical practices such as micro-history, with its emphasis on the local and unique, and its distrust of overarching, unifying narratives? Perhaps, but historians have not yet really attempted it perhaps for fear of entering too deeply into the Nazi mindset on the one hand, and for fear of stepping away from the mainstream, and appearing to focus on non-measurable factors, on the other. In Holocaust historiography, where a cultural historical approach is most needed, it is striking that the historiography has remained far more traditional than in most other fields of history—and this despite the massive literature.

There are some exceptions to this claim. Much Israeli historiography, from the early post-war period onwards, has focused on Jewish religious behaviour with regard to the question of *kiddush hahayim* (sanctification of life) versus *kiddush hashem* (sanctification of the Lord) for example; on Nazi vocabulary and linguistics and on Jewish reactions to persecution. Many local studies—published in all the languages of Europe and beyond—continue to appear in large numbers, dealing with matters of resistance and complicity, rescue and collaboration, as well as religious issues. But these studies are to some extent isolated from the mainstream of what Robert Berkhofer would call the "great story" (or grand narrative) of the Holocaust.[46] And none of these studies is conceptualised in terms of cultural history, however, even if their concerns are close to the approach being advocated here. Only in the context of Jewish history has a plea for cultural history been made recently, by Moshe Rosman.[47]

One final area that is linked to the emergence of cultural history but which is too large to be encompassed by it and which therefore requires separate

45 Léon Poliakov, *Harvest of Hate* (London, 1956); Léon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, trans. Edmund Howard (London, 1974); Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (London, 1967); Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London [1957], 1970); Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (London, 1975); Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (Philadelphia [1943], 1983).

46 Berkhofer.

47 Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish is Jewish History?* (Oxford, 2007), especially chapter 5.

treatment, is the theme of memory in Holocaust studies. For Confino, memory and cultural history are more or less synonymous and in this sense the main contributions to Holocaust memory have also been contributions to wider debates, in a manner similar to that made by studies of the question of representation as discussed above. Indeed, here historians have long been at the forefront of research, as in the work in German history of Alon Confino, Peter Fritzsche, Rudy Koshar, Gavriel Rosenfeld, Paul Betts and others. But it must be said that although much of the work on Holocaust memory has been influential in memory studies more generally, it has largely been undertaken, not by historians but by literary scholars, sociologists and philosophers. The writings of Saul Friedländer, Dominick LaCapra, Barbie Zelizer, Geoffrey Hartman, Marianne Hirsch and many others has been extremely influential, but even the few historians in that list have non-standard research interests and are unusually open to theory, especially trauma theory.[48] 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.

CONCLUSION

In his remarkable analysis of Nazism, *Germany Jekyll and Hyde*, published in exile in 1940 and recently republished, Sebastian Haffner argued that it does not suffice to historicise Hitler; to try and understand him, as so many Allied propagandists did, as part of a German tradition:

> to tabulate Hitler, as it were, in the History of Ideas and degrade him to an historical episode is a hopeless undertaking, and can only lead to perilous miscalculations. Much more progress towards an accurate estimation of the man can be made if one takes exactly the opposite course and considers German and European history as a part of Hitler's private life.[49]

Here is an insight that is central to a cultural history approach: rather than seek to provide economic, social, military or other factors that provide a meaningful context for understanding the way in which the Holocaust unfolded, we should instead willingly suspend our disbelief and assume for the moment that the Nazis meant what they said, that they created

48 For a broad-brush discussion of this literature see my "Beyond the Mnemosyne Institute: The Future of Memory after the Age of Commemoration," *The Future of Memory*, eds. Richard Crownshaw et al. (New York, forthcoming 2009). An interesting article that brings trauma theory to bear on Holocaust historiography is Amos Goldberg, "Trauma, Narrative, and Two Forms of Death," *Literature and Medicine* 25 (2006): 122–141.

49 Haffner 5.

reality to fit in with their belief system and not vice-versa. Only in this way can the Holocaust become comprehensible—as the outcome of a German narrative through which the perpetrators made sense of the world. This is also the reason why the victims could not make sense of events whilst they were occurring and why they, their descendants and, in recent years, the community at large, have struggled to make sense of them too.