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Holocaust studies: what is to be learned?

MARK S. PEACOCK and PAUL A. ROTH

The term ‘Holocaust studies’ names a designated field. It is a field allegedly characterized by (at least) two difficulties which make the Holocaust unlike any other topic in the inventory of academic disciplines. While all social (and other) phenomena can be said to be unique, the uniqueness predicated of the Holocaust stems from a sense of an extremeness which is unmatched by, and unimaginable in, any other episode or event in human history. Those approaching the Holocaust either through scholarly study or through commonplace reflection seem particularly prone to the sentiment that ‘*Nothing* else could be *that* appalling’.

This appallingness may be thought to secure the putative *uniqueness* of the Holocaust in one of two different ways. First, the Holocaust’s particular horror makes it morally unique, at least in the following sense. Any attempt to integrate it into a more general account serves only to diminish its moral significance. On this view, the moral magnitude of the Holocaust can only be upheld by emphasizing its singularity when compared with other historical phenomena. Second, uniqueness engenders a claim of the event’s incomprehensibility. The Holocaust here appears as a singular rupture in the natural world, a break not only in the moral order, but also in the very order of (human) nature. As befits such a bizarre episode, it defies integration into received schemes of explanation or understanding.

Of the two difficulties confronting Holocaust studies, the first flows from its imputed moral uniqueness – theorizing it would deny its singular stature and so diminish its moral impact. For theories, being of a *general* nature, would divest the Holocaust of its uniqueness, conceiving it, instead, as an

instance of a more general type akin to other instances subsumed under that type. This would clearly strip the Holocaust of its uniqueness.

Furthermore, it follows from the uniqueness thesis that analogical illumination of the Holocaust is as futile as its theoretical counterpart, for there is simply no phenomenon that offers an analogy that resembles the Holocaust in its enormity and horror. Whether the *analogans* take the form of grossly barbarous deeds or even other instances of genocide, these, despite their horror, fall short of the Holocaust in its unsurpassable abomination. Consequently, it is argued, they fail to illuminate the Holocaust by analogy. Indeed, comparisons that attempt to depict other episodes in human history as being of equal barbarity and inhumanity to the Holocaust often meet with critical, if not hostile, responses from those who believe that the mantle of unsurpassable abomination be reserved for the Holocaust alone. Those who suggest such comparisons often stand accused of wanting to play down the significance of the Holocaust. In this sense, attempts to theorize the Holocaust may be morally condemned and castigated for ‘relativizing’ the Holocaust, perhaps for political reasons.¹

The second difficulty that besets Holocaust studies relates to the first but stands logically independent of it. It concerns not the uniqueness but the comprehensibility of the Holocaust. The difficulty results, again, from the horrific nature of the Holocaust. Here one encounters claims that the Holocaust cannot (and perhaps should not) be comprehended at all. Indeed, many studies of the Holocaust deem the ‘How was it possible?’ question to be unanswerable. The rhetorical character of the question is remarkable – one poses it not to elicit an answer but to express the pathos and despair one feels when confronted by the Holocaust and the helplessness when trying to understand ‘how it was possible’. The second difficulty, then, is an explanatory and interpretative one. Understanding or otherwise accounting for such behaviours, the suggestion goes, lies beyond the ken of normal beings. Like the act of a whimsical, malevolent deity, the Holocaust again stands *sui generis*, marked only by its isolation from all else in human experience.

Yet these claims to uniqueness impose untoward limits on approaches to understanding and explaining the Holocaust. For by conceiving it to be unique, one isolates the Holocaust from all other historical phenomena. ‘Holocaust studies’ thereby becomes a field whose sole item consists of an episode that, because of its extremeness, is held to bear no relation to any other. And from an item without relation to any other, one cannot learn (in the sense of drawing lessons from it, for the lessons must concern the item itself and it alone). This attitude also precludes the hope of illuminating the Holocaust either theoretically or in analogy to other historical episodes. For uniqueness, in the sense claimed of the Holocaust, places it beyond the reach of theoretical resources which, being of a *general* nature, would divest the Holocaust of its uniqueness, as we have noted above. Yet this is what

proponents of the uniqueness thesis reject: there is *no* such type of which the Holocaust is an instance; the Holocaust is *sui generis*.

In various ways, the contributors to this issue try to prise open the brackets which the two aforementioned difficulties place around the Holocaust. Each author brings theoretical resources to bear on the subject-matter and thereby places it into a general framework. That is, a necessary condition of *theorizing the Holocaust* is that the Holocaust (or at least aspects of it) be sufficiently similar to other phenomena to allow one to study it with the help of theoretical resources developed, in the main, independently of it. The Holocaust is thereby drawn into the company of phenomena susceptible to theoretical observation and analysis. On the view taken by the editors, the Holocaust's highly unusual nature both recommends it as an object of study and makes it one from which academic disciplines can learn. The challenge which this subject-matter provides should not yield to the counsels of despair implicit in claims to its uniqueness.

It should come as no surprise, given our charge to those whom we asked to contribute to this issue, that the resulting essays make frequent reference to Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1997).² Goldhagen's book has been the subject of intense discussion and controversy of a sort unrivalled by any other since the publication of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). Of note from our point of view is Goldhagen's position on the two difficulties facing Holocaust studies discussed above. On the one hand, Goldhagen avails himself of social scientific methods; he himself describes his intent as 'primarily explanatory and theoretical' rather than straightforwardly narrative-historical (1997: 467). Yet, on the other hand, he does not relate the Holocaust via these methods to other historical phenomena. Rather, he insists on the Holocaust's uniqueness with regard to its being a case of morally aberrant behaviour. Goldhagen remains allied to the moral uniqueness thesis (the first difficulty of Holocaust studies), but lifts the explanatory embargo identified as the second difficulty above.

His stance on the two difficulties of Holocaust studies is succinctly captured in the following statement: 'The Holocaust was a *sui generis* event that has a historically specific explanation' (1997: 419). What made it *sui generis*, even in comparison with other cases of genocide, lies in the extent and nature of German participation. Yet maintaining its uniqueness does not imply that the Holocaust be inexplicable (*ibid.*: 5, 13). Quite the contrary: Goldhagen not only holds that the Holocaust can be explained but also provides a causal explanation of it. In his view, a successful explanation of the Holocaust *must* capture the specificity of its subject-matter, something which 'conventional explanations' fail to do (*ibid.*: 392). Indeed, Goldhagen maintains, his account proves to be not simply adequate to the explanatory task, but distinctly superior to any other explanation proffered hitherto.

To accomplish his explanatory task, Goldhagen argues that it was not

ordinary people, but ordinary *Germans* who perpetrated the deeds comprising the Holocaust. What marks the difference is that Germans, as Goldhagen (1997: 23) conceives them, were imbued with a 'virulent and violent "eliminationist" variant of antisemitism', which comprised the 'cognitive model' of the German people. Jews were seen not only as an enemy of the German people but also as a 'race' to be removed from German society through elimination. Regarding the perpetrators themselves, Goldhagen answers the 'How was it possible?' question with an intentionalist thesis. Crudely stated, it was possible because Germans wanted it. Perpetrators chose to commit the acts committed; they saw such acts as desirable, necessary and just; and they committed them with supererogatory brutality and glee. Indeed, it is the zeal with which Germans undertook their deeds which Goldhagen holds to be peculiar to the Holocaust. All 'conventional explanations' – those prior to Goldhagen's own – fail precisely because they cannot account for the persecutory enthusiasm Germans brought to the task of extermination.³ Adverting to Germans' enthusiasm for killing and their extraordinary loathing of Jews is how Goldhagen manages to maintain both that the Holocaust has a unique, morally monstrous character and yet that it can ultimately be made explicable.

The authors of the essays commissioned for this issue rose to the challenge given them by the editors in interesting and unanticipated ways. In particular, the essays 'pair off' in a surprising fashion. We find four such pairings. First, Eleonore Stump and Harald Welzer each explore, from the standpoint of her or his own discipline, some specifically moral quandaries arising from study of the Holocaust. Second, Carolyn Dean and Wulf Kansteiner examine the challenges presented by representing trauma, both in terms of respecting those represented and with regard to challenging the concept of trauma. Third, John Bendix and Joyce Mushaben examine the interplay of theory and biography. Bendix does so from a unique combination of personal and disciplinary backgrounds, as someone who himself is simultaneously bound to the Holocaust as a theorist and as a child of a German émigré, indeed, an émigré who was both a theorist of and a participant in the social drama discussed. Mushaben too investigates how the personal, the political, and the theoretical are interrelated. Her perspective, however, concerns the role of women in the Holocaust and the gendering of Holocaust studies. Finally, Nigel Pleasants and Paul Roth discuss the putative obstacles to comprehending the Holocaust. *Pace* Goldhagen, both offer analogies to the Holocaust that construe it as experientially 'closer' to us than conventional wisdom would allow. Together, the four pairs of essays mount a series of challenges to the claim that the Holocaust constitutes a phenomenon which, morally or explanatorily, fails to intersect with the rest of human experience. The sad truth is that it does.

WELZER AND STUMP

In his contribution, Harald Welzer asks after the moral psychology of the perpetrators. Welzer commends Goldhagen for rejecting a depiction of perpetrators which posits a peculiar relationship between their moral beliefs and their actions. According to this depiction, moral beliefs first had to be *overcome* before (hitherto) normal people could commit acts of extermination. More often than not, the idea that one must overcome moral barriers before committing horrific deeds reflects the observer's (*our*) moral values rather than those of perpetrators. Goldhagen is exceptional in that he contests the usual depiction: it was a particular moral code which *enabled* the perpetrators to do what they did; nothing had to be overcome, for the people involved were already abnormal by virtue of their cognitive model.

Although Welzer does not agree with Goldhagen's cognitive model account, he, too, asks the question: Did perpetrators follow a moral code which facilitated the killing? By considering the biography of Franz Stangl, commandant of Treblinka, Welzer finds an enabling moral code quite different to that of Goldhagen's monolithic eliminationist mind-set. Stangl did not hold himself responsible for eliminating Jews for he was simply following orders and could not therefore exercise free choice in the deeds over which he presided. In his own estimation he was no 'willing executioner'. What was important to him was his self-image as somebody who, within the externally imposed framework of extermination, carried out his work with integrity, impartiality and even an amicability which went beyond the call of duty. These are the virtues upon which Stangl laid great value.⁴

Goldhagen addresses a similar point but draws a different conclusion. He opens his book by citing Wolfgang Hoffmann, commander of a police battalion responsible for the murder of tens of thousands of Jews in Poland, who exhibits a similar moral code to that of Stangl. Hoffmann was outraged at having received a command that the men in his company sign a declaration obliging themselves 'not to steal, not to plunder, and not to buy without paying' (1997: 1). As men of good moral character, wrote Hoffmann, the soldiers under his command refrained from such acts of their 'own free will'. To require that they bind themselves to acts to which they have no inclination is thus superfluous, but worse, it bespeaks a lack of trust in their moral character which besmirches their reputation. Hoffmann accordingly felt 'injured in my sense of honour'. This is the very same pattern that Welzer finds in Stangl: morality is predicated only of that which lies under one's own responsibility, which, in the cases of Stangl and Hoffmann, consists in matters towards which one can exercise free will. This responsibility makes it important to the individuals involved that they behave in their own eyes with moral integrity.⁵

The moral quandary of interest to Eleonore Stump arises not from the

perspective of the moral psychology of perpetrators, but from that of a philosopher of religion interested in concepts such as guilt (individual and communal), repentance, and forgiveness. Her approach draws upon Aquinas, in particular his notion of sin as a 'stain on the soul'.

Stump offers a thought experiment in which the following scenario is depicted: the Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, survives the war and genuinely comes to repent all that the Nazis did as well as his own part in doing it. What, asks Stump, is the appropriate attitude to a Goebbels so imagined? What one confronts here, Stump notes, involves an intuition that even the sincerely and fervently repentant Goebbels remains an unattractive figure to most if not all people. What, though, separates Goebbels from humanity? In order to clarify our intuition Stump calls into play Aquinas's account of what, on the one hand, makes for repentance but, on the other hand, what remains, after repentance, as a *stain on the soul*. The stain, on this view, remains as a mark of the previous relationship between the individual and those he wronged. While the repenter's will may never move that person to sin again, repentance cannot repair that which was disrupted by the sin. As Stump writes, if, for example, one person betrays another's trust or friendship, then even if subsequently peace be made between them, gone for ever is nonetheless an 'innocence in their relationship, [which has] lost some of its brightness and was shadowed or stained by . . . acts of betrayal'. The key notion of a disturbed relationship, one that remains disturbed even after the will's relation to God is put right, helps clarify, in turn, the importance of remembrance and makes us aware of the continual repentance we owe to those whom we have wronged. Stump's account is both provocative and suggestive. For it attempts at one and the same time to reconcile the notion that one can genuinely atone or repent one's sins and yet identifies a sense in which even the most sincere penitent leaves something in his or her relation to others and to God disturbed, lessened, and unresolved.

DEAN AND KANSTEINER

Carolyn Dean's essay puts into practice a historiographical approach explored and elaborated by Dominick LaCapra. On the model LaCapra propounds, an historian's relation to troubling material ought to take the form of a psychoanalytic encounter, specifically one of working through one's disturbing relationship to the events studied. Once again, Goldhagen emerges as a focal text, for his book, more than any other, looks to engage its readers in an empathetic identification with those who suffered at the hands of the Nazis. Goldhagen's narrative voice, in this regard, deliberately eschews the type of distance and objectivity which academic prose typically manifests and, indeed, is thought to require. Yet, as Dean documents, historians reject

as inappropriate and 'unprofessional' Goldhagen's open identification with and sympathy for the Holocaust victims about whom he writes. 'In what follows', writes Dean, 'I am interested in how other historians self-consciously restore to victims the dignity Goldhagen was believed to have exploited in his own emotive reconstruction of their suffering. In particular, how do they seek to avoid reproducing cognitive numbing both as cause and effect of Jewish suffering and on another level, in both the content and narrative form of their work?' Against the charge that Goldhagen exploits the suffering of those he studies for his own rhetorical purposes, Dean seeks not to vindicate Goldhagen's approach so much as to explore rhetorical alternatives between Goldhagen's often shrill demands that readers too identify with the sufferings depicted and, at another extreme, a too dispassionate accounting of the troubling material that the Holocaust presents to those who study and write about it.

Dean analyses different rhetorical approaches as to how the historian/author situates herself or himself with regard to the material discussed. 'This essay aims to understand better the way in which this particular commitment to dignity and empathy in various guises defines, enables, and constrains historical knowledge. . . . More specifically, I focus on the different ways in which some professional historians seek to forge identifications between contemporary readers and the victims of past genocide and with what emotional and analytical consequences.' In addition to Goldhagen, she examines key texts by Christopher Browning, Inga Clendinnen, and Omar Bartov.

Kansteiner confronts the oft bruited metaphor of the Holocaust as trauma. He proposes to challenge the adequacy of this characterization for purposes of theorizing the Holocaust at a variety of levels.

Viewed exclusively from the perspective of trauma the analysis of the legacy of the Holocaust leads into two conceptual dead ends. Either the Final Solution becomes simply one of the many 'normal' traumata that are part of the human condition or it is relegated to the narrow intellectual space reserved for the study of extremely violent historical events. Neither venue provides any insights into the experiences of most of our contemporaries who encounter the history of the Holocaust primarily as a tool of education, entertainment, or identity politics.

Kansteiner reviews literature which not only surveys psychological problems of survivors and their children, but also, and much more controversially, looks at postwar studies of the effects of their action on the perpetrators themselves. In this regard, Kansteiner's essay thematically overlaps as well with Stump's, who considers personal and psychological problems encountered by the surviving children or other relatives of prominent Nazis.

He also refers to Welzer's work in attempting to discern how the psychological impact of Holocaust representations in popular culture has influenced the ways in which the Holocaust is remembered individually and memorialized collectively. Kansteiner insists that ambiguities with regard to the notion of trauma, particularly how trauma is individually and collectively 'distributed', make it a poor choice as an analytic tool for investigating the impact of the Holocaust at the personal or the social level. '[T]he concept is relatively useless, perhaps even counterproductive, for the analysis of the ambivalent psychological space of lingering anxiety, comforting identification, and suspenseful entertainment that the Holocaust occupies in contemporary culture. In the future of Holocaust Studies psychological concepts other than trauma will hopefully play a much more important role.'

BENDIX AND MUSHABEN

The Holocaust can easily acquire a status in our collective memory as something monolithic, as the characterization '*The Holocaust*' betrays. Within this monolith lie so many levels of memory and discourse that a certain differentiation and unraveling of layers is necessary. However, at the other extreme, there is such an endless plethora of individual histories and acts of remembrance that *the* Holocaust could be ground into a massive collection of isolated narratives all beckoning for attention but without being organized into a systematic whole. Those who wish to theorize the Holocaust must steer a path between these extremes, as the example of Goldhagen's monolith – the eliminationist cognitive model – warns us.⁶

John Bendix proposes an understanding of 'theory' which does justice to the multi-layered nature of the Holocaust. He unites broad social scientific categories (such as community, society, culture) with personal narratives (experience, career, family) using among other examples that of his own family. Bendix's grandfather, a German Jew, was divested of his citizenship by the Nazis and forced to leave the country in 1937. Although he identified with his nation rather than his religion, he was seen by his compatriots as a token of 'Jewishness' and was not therefore accepted into the German *Volks-gemeinschaft*. Bendix puts the categories *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* to good use in tracing out the self-understandings of individuals as well as the identities ascribed to them by others. The result is a theorizing of the Holocaust which shifts between different levels of analysis without losing sight of the connections between them. The narrative therefore maintains a focus on the individual's experience as well as on the social categories that capture the situation and predicament in which the individual finds himself or herself. Consequently, Bendix's approach avoids the extremes of 'intentionalism' and

'functionalism' which have become both over-used and over-polarized in Holocaust studies.

Joyce Mushaben is our second contributor who looks at personal narratives in their historical context. She differentiates a layer of the monolithic Holocaust by looking at the fate of women who played different roles in Hitler's Germany, from minor functionaries to women of the highest establishment and through to victims of Nazi atrocities. Mushaben's analysis reveals that there is not only a 'history', but also a 'HERstory' of the Holocaust, the telling of which has emerged only during what Peter Reichel (2001: 199) calls the 'second history' of German National Socialism. This second history of the Holocaust consists of reflections and discourses on its first history, i.e. the Holocaust itself. This is an ongoing engagement with the Holocaust which has revealed more and more facets as it has proceeded, thereby drawing an ever-expanding circle of participants into Holocaust studies. These participants extend far beyond the immediate circle of Holocaust *dramatis personae* (politicians, soldiers, SS functionaries, concentration camp guards and victims, forced labourers, etc.). They include individuals who might be thought to have had such a marginal role in the grand narrative of history that they may be legitimately overlooked. Yet each has experiences which contribute to the unending unfolding of the Holocaust and its second history. Mushaben adds usefully to this second history by looking at various and very different roles which women played.

In writing his- or herstories of the Holocaust, scholars should be reminded that they are contributing to this second history which itself has become an object of analysis. This suggests a type of theorizing which is reflexive in nature, for, in studying the Holocaust, scholars are not only generating knowledge about past events but also constituting a continuously unfolding object of investigation, the second history of the Holocaust.

PLEASANTS AND ROTH

Nigel Pleasants finds Goldhagen's thesis wanting because it explains only that the extermination of Jews follows from Germans' belief that the Jews be their enemy. Yet with his idea of a 'cognitive model', Goldhagen does not explain why Germans saw Jews as they did; and by locating the source of this model in German culture, Goldhagen could equally argue not that Germans were themselves necessarily extraordinary but that their *culture* was so. Goldhagen resists this conclusion, for if he were to make 'culture' the *explanans* of the Holocaust, he would displace the explanatory and moral burden from the allegedly extraordinary individuals onto external circumstances. Yet precisely such circumstances cannot be sufficient, Goldhagen argues, to explain the fervour and alacrity with which perpetrators acted.

Pleasants draws attention to Goldhagen's anthropological/hermeneutic approach to German society in the 1930s. This approach, holds Pleasants, is somewhat rudimentary and takes the form of mentally re-enacting the experiences of others, in this case, German perpetrators. Goldhagen (1997: 21) bids us to 'imagin[e] ourselves in their places, performing their deeds, acting as they did, viewing what they beheld'. Following Peter Winch, Pleasants tries to improve on this approach and asks: Can we find practices analogous to genocidal elimination which, unlike the latter, are familiar to us from our own culture? The question may seem heretical, yet if there were such practices, we could ourselves pose the 'How is it possible?' question and thus come to understand, by analogy, what it may have been like for perpetrators to commit atrocities against Jews and to live in a world in which such atrocities were everyday occurrences. Other instances of genocide which are often compared with the Holocaust (and there are, alas, many to choose from) are obviously of no use because they are equally alien to us as the annihilation of Jews.

Pleasants seeks something familiar to us and finds his analogy in the use of animals by humans in food production and experimental research. If the analogy is fitting, then it transpires that being implicated in acts of inhumanity is a fairly mundane, unremarkable, everyday fact of life, for most of us are implicated in the unnecessary suffering and slaughter of animals, yet few of us ask 'How is it possible?' that such practices exist because most of us are so routinely implicated in them. Of those who do question the morality of such practices, many nevertheless choose freely to remain implicated therein. This leaves only a few who consistently oppose such practices in both attitude and deed.

Paul Roth examines and rejects explanations of perpetrator behaviour which either radically depersonalize causal factors – a view he finds in Zygmunt Bauman's work – or turn actors into social dopes – a consequence he notes in Goldhagen's pseudo-anthropology. In particular, Roth contends that Goldhagen's 'cognitive model' account of perpetrators' deeds is too deterministic; for those exposed to the model, it precludes moral reflection which could lead to a condemnation of cruelty towards, and killing of, Jews. Goldhagen works with a crude opposition between actions based on 'coercion' and on 'choice'. If an action is dictated by circumstances, it is coerced; if not, it is freely chosen. Since Goldhagen rejects the 'structural' account of the Holocaust (which focuses on the circumstances rather than on the beliefs and desires of perpetrators), he concludes that Germans chose the deeds they performed and hence they were *willing* executioners.

Goldhagen (1997: 11–13) rejects comparisons between the Holocaust and psychological experiments *à la* Milgram (to whom he refers [383, 490 n. 26]). He insists, rather, that the acts of violence and murder in the Holocaust were 'extraordinary' and thus of a different magnitude to (and perhaps a different

quality from) those of Milgram's subjects. Thus, as we have pointed out, while Goldhagen contests the thesis that the Holocaust be inexplicable, he nevertheless insists on the uniqueness of the Holocaust. This insistence manifests itself in his unreceptiveness to analogies between the Holocaust and other phenomena (be it behaviour in compliance experiments or the use of animals by human beings).

Roth maintains that both Goldhagen and Bauman misinterpret the social psychology which Goldhagen rejects and Bauman accepts. Roth reviews this literature to show why it cannot be dismissed for the reasons Goldhagen gives and why, in addition, it does not support the view Bauman defends. Yet, Roth maintains, the 'Asch paradigm' does provide the key to perpetrator behaviour. Using the fact that people *comply* as an *explanandum* for their actions, Roth obviates the need to posit a causal relationship between the beliefs people hold (that Jews are enemies and ought to be exterminated) and their actions (extermination). For if one registers that people do comply, even to the most extreme roles and forms of behaviour to which few would assent were they to express their private considered opinion on the matter, one can account for the behaviour of many Germans without suggesting a priori that they were incapable of recognizing the moral impropriety of their deeds. Compliance, Roth notes, need not preclude agency.

CONCLUSION

Goldhagen's *coup de grâce* is 'to question our assumptions about that society's [Germany's] similarity to our own' (1997: 28). Hence he sees himself forced to adopt an anthropological approach to Germany before and under the Nazis rather than exploring that society analogically. Those investigating Nazi Germany analogically must of course contend with the striking differences between Germany in the 1930s and 'our own society' today. However, one must not overburden an analogy with expectations. An analogy serves to point out similarities between things which are otherwise *dissimilar*. Consequently one can always (by the very definition of an analogy) argue that an analogy fails to capture the haecceity of the things compared. Yet the question is: Do aspects of one item (the *analogans*) bear sufficient resemblance to aspects of another (the *analogandum*) to aid our comprehension of the latter item? And in the question lies, of course, a reflexive relation between the items brought into analogy with one another: does the item which we are trying to understand with the help of an analogy, shed light back onto the former item, the *analogans*, which, because of its initial familiarity to us, we used in trying to understand something less familiar?

This reveals a further aspect of what is to be learned from the Holocaust: by probing the Holocaust analogically, we establish a two-way relation

between the Holocaust and aspects of 'our own society' which are more familiar to us. We can thereby learn things about the Holocaust *and* about our own society which were previously foreclosed to us. Nothing in this mitigates the moral horror or the extremities of behaviour studied. But the unpleasant truth turns out to be that the Holocaust represents a phenomenon through which we can gain insights about ourselves. We might rather choose to remain oblivious to such insights, for they do not necessarily present us in the light in which we would like to appear. But only by confronting such comparisons can we hope to learn therefrom.

NOTES

- 1 This was the case in the so-called *Historikerstreit* among German intellectuals in 1986 (see Peacock, 2001 for an analysis).
- 2 All references to Goldhagen in this introduction pertain to this book.
- 3 For a discussion of the 'smile problem' and its significance as a challenge to and an anomaly within schemes of explanation of the Holocaust, see Roth (2003).
- 4 In a series of interviews in 1971, it was allegations that he had compromised *these* virtues which caused Stangl moral discomfort and not the fact that he had presided over the deaths of countless Jews. Only regarding the former did Stangl feel personally accountable; regarding the latter, he saw himself as a mere operative who carried no responsibility for what was going on.
- 5 Yet Goldhagen does not follow up the point; of import to him is not the personal moral code of perpetrators, but the cultural 'mind-set' with which German were imbued. What characterizes his position is that such inhibitions were not broken down in the Nazi period but *long before*. In the century before the Nazis assumed power, Germans had been 'shaped' or 'changed' (Goldhagen's terms [1997: 7, 8, 23]) in ways that broke down their diffidence towards committing acts of cruelty and murder against Jews. In this respect, Goldhagen's approach is a variant of the orthodox thesis that something (preexisting moral norms) had to be 'overcome' before the Holocaust could become possible.
- 6 Goldhagen (1997: 33) himself uses the term 'monolithic' in outlining the idea of a cognitive model.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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