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**“Modernity and the Mechanisms of
Moral Neutralisation,” Introduction
to the Arabic Edition of Zygmunt
Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust***

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The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman begins his *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) by recounting his discovery of a common misconception: that the genocide of the Jews of Europe (the Holocaust) is an exception or interruption to the flow of modernity and perhaps history in general, a fit of madness or anomaly that struck certain parts of modern society. The book as a whole is an attempt to establish a sociological approach to the Holocaust as *part* of modernity, or one aspect thereof. It is necessary for sociology to make it an object of study because the fundamental elements that produced it are part of modern society. If it were merely an exception or deviation from modernity's natural course – a brief sickness – there would be no need for sociological theory to try and cover it: a theory assumes a given recurring structure requiring a theoretical model to understand and account for it.

This idea appears throughout the book in different forms without the writer arriving at a sociological theory that goes beyond simply explaining the conditions for genocide in the modern era – the conditions that distinguish it from other previous historical massacres that have taken place during wartime, when killing and displacement came along with the spread of plague and famine. The book is a critique of existing approaches to the Holocaust and a call to produce a new theory, raising some important ideas relevant to such a theory without in practice fully formulating one.

Alongside this particular misconception, there are other manifestations of Holocaust exceptionalism:

- The 'specialist industry' of Holocaust studies that approaches it as a self-contained field of study.
- Treating the Holocaust as a phenomenon concerning Jews exclusively, and its use by Israel to defend Zionism on the basis that it is a part of Jewish history. The Zionist approach begins from a false premise: that anti-Semitism is a phenomenon that always has and always will exist, and that genocides – like the Holocaust – are its natural product. Attempts by Zionism and Israel to monopolise study of the Holocaust are instrumental, allowing them not only to play the role of the eternal victim but also to blackmail, shame and terrorise anyone who dares criticise Israel even when it is the perpetrator.
- Consideration of the Holocaust only through rituals, commemorative ceremonies and 'solemn homilies'.
- Treating the Holocaust as an exclusively German phenomenon, a product of the country's history and the particular kinds of nationalist movements that emerged there. Specialists list the various peculiarities of Germany responsible for the emergence and implementation of the idea of genocide: German Romanticism; ideas glorifying the relationship between *Volk*, blood and land; the manner in which the German nation-state emerged; ideas of race (not a German invention); German reactions to Enlightenment thought – even Germany's reaction to being denied colonies and the particular Lutheran form of Protestantism and its anti-Semitic proclivities. The list of distinct German qualities is long, like those of any other people. Many of these ostensible German peculiarities can be refuted, but this is not our object here.

Bauman believes that researchers are wary of approaching the topic with the tools of social science because, privately, they believe that doing so may lead to the conclusion that the Holocaust was



more than just a deviation or sickness. In their innermost selves they fear that they will discover that this phenomenon of genocide is not *the antithesis* but rather *one aspect of* modern Western civilisation – one not at all to their liking. And they may also discover that the bright aspect of modernity that *is* to their liking cannot be present without its other, darker aspect.⁽¹⁾

In this book the author does not, as he admits, present new historical data; he is not a historian, and relies on the work of those who are and who have produced detailed treatments, verifying documents and collecting witnesses' testimony. Historians are his real and perhaps only source, since he has spent no time in the archives and has neither verified documents nor met with victims himself. We must not forget his personal connection to the Holocaust, his wife whose Holocaust memoir inspired his writing of this book, and perhaps other personal contacts. The author cannot overall be separated from the subject of the book in this case. But he remains in pure academic terms a sociologist whose main source is the work of historians. This is a point in his favour, since there are few sociologists who evince as much interest in the work of historians as they should in order to understand the history of the phenomena and social structures they concern themselves with. Sociologists' love for narratives when interpreting existing social structures and their tendency to hastily conclude others are attributable in large part to insufficient familiarity with history. And just as Bauman values historians' work, he criticises that of sociologists, attempting to draw on the former, as he says, not in order to 'add to specialist knowledge and to enrich certain marginal preoccupations of social scientists, but to open up the findings of the specialists to the general use of social science, to interpret them in a way that shows their relevance to the main themes of sociological inquiry.'⁽²⁾

The modernist approach to the Holocaust begins from the premise that it is a deviation from the essence of modernisation itself, in the sense of a process of rationalisation and civilisation: the retreat of interpersonal violence as communities' barbarism and savagery is disciplined constitutes one of the main elements of civilisation. Civilisation, from this perspective, is a process by which limits (with all their mechanisms and institutions) are imposed on instincts and violence retreats in everyday life, following Norbert Elias. Without suppression of instinct morals have no staying power. If the crime of the Holocaust was a shocking return to barbarism, an explosion of suppressed savagery that erupted like a volcano from beneath the crust of civilisation, modernity must have failed in this task. Bauman does not sufficiently distinguish between civilisation in the sense above, which is not limited to modernity, and the specific form of civilisation in modernity which manifests in the regulation of a society composed of individuals and communities, the emergence of state institutions (with their unprecedented capacity to surveille, control and discipline society) and their rationalisation through the emergence of bureaucracy, the scientific and technological revolution, and the revolution in productivity and productive forces.

The major question is: is the Holocaust phenomenon, the genocide phenomenon, the product of the failure to discipline or of discipline itself, of its mechanisms breaking down or of those mechanisms

1 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 7.

2 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

themselves? This is the great question in the book. It can be connected more broadly with the ideas of Bauman's generation of sociologists, who can be considered postmodernists, on the one hand, and prior to that to the ideas of the Frankfurt School and Freudian psychoanalysis. Many of these ideas appear in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a work that Bauman praises several times within the book (unlike other postmodern theorists who do not acknowledge this influence). The road leading to the Nazi crimes, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, began with the separation of science and theory in favour of technical use of science on the one hand, and the separation of science and morality on the other hand, transforming ethics into an emotional, moralistic and irrational affair unworthy of a scientist.⁽³⁾ Bauman repeats this point throughout the book. It is one of the contradictions of Enlightenment that warn of crises to come.

It must be noted here that the early optimistic Enlightenment tendency that set off on its campaign against ignorance in favour of rational knowledge from the premise that what is *true* must therefore also be *good* for man and for society preceded from the separation between science and ethics, and that in its own time this separation seemed like progress. But it expanded to encompass scientists' culture and ethics, which seemed to many of them unscientific – although this was not a fault but rather one of the most important distinguishing features of free moral decision ungoverned unlike science by determinism. But those who adopted the *culture* of separation between science and ethics, and not merely a separation in *research methodology*, came to see ethical diktats as a fault diminishing its ostensible scientific objectivity.

Unfortunately, like Horkheimer and Adorno, Bauman does not concede that the problem thus does not lie with the separation of science and ethics – for without this separation it is impossible to maintain a scientific methodology, and to my mind difficult to maintain the distinguishing features of ethics – but rather in the culture of disdain for ethics that this separation produces, and of considering emancipation from ethical norms the same as reasonableness and objectivity, even where ethical norms alone should be adopted without any other considerations.

The Enlightenment conviction that using reason and arriving at rational choices lead to good or virtue and correct moral choices is borrowed from Enlightenment thought more generally. Many postmodernist thinkers have written that it is not possible to derive the good, the right or the just from a description of the true or the correct.⁽⁴⁾ Emmanuel Kant anticipated this conclusion when he distinguished between pure and practical reason. The majority of social theories are borrowed from the period of transition from feudalism to capitalism, from the medieval to the modern, and terms like 'individual' and 'society' as social entities, as well as terms pertaining to the connection between reason and freedom are the product of that period; there are attempts to impose them onto the present.

If we return to Freud's psychoanalytical approach, which claims that civilisation is only possible by suppressing and repressing instincts, these same instruments lead to social rules and norms and

3 Max Horkheimer and Teodor Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*. Mit einem Nachwort von Jürgen Habermas, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1988), p. 92.

4 J. F. Lyotard, *Political Writings*, (London: UCL Press, 1993), p. 27 - 28.



ethics, and likewise to the psychopathologies that accompany modernity. Hence considering the operation of the mechanisms of discipline itself to be responsible, not their failure, does not make it impossible to see the Holocaust as a form of deviation.⁽⁵⁾ Bauman is either unaware of or unconcerned with this problem: he considers Freudian terms like ‘neurosis’ to be the other side of mechanisms of discipline and surveillance in modernity, including the suppression of instinct and instrumentality of reason. There are widespread types of neurosis, including the institutionalisation of collective hysteria, which may be a deviation from an imagined nature but are not a numerical exception. Freud’s account of deviance rests on the success of the mechanisms of civilisation in suppressing instincts and natural inclinations, whether hostility and violence, the pursuit of pleasure, or both. Compromising on human ‘liberty’ in exchange for safety and the meeting of needs is what makes social life possible. Civilisation for him is based on the conflict between society and the individual, and on protection of the individual from what might be referred to in the language of other thinkers as the hostility of the state of nature, but ultimately suppresses the individual with the aim of realising collective happiness: civilisation, too, becomes a source of desperation.

But Bauman also warns of the opposite extreme to the idea that the Holocaust is a deviation from modernity. This approach, having recognised the bankruptcy of the other vision, arrives at another extreme and facile conclusion: understanding the Holocaust phenomenon as a hegemonic model in Western civilisation and its natural and normal product, in the sense that genocide is the *essence* of Western civilisation. It thus falls into another error, making the Holocaust part of the everyday and robbing genocide of any specificity. This leads to an even greater error: playing down the importance of genocide as a phenomenon indistinct from other ‘negatives’ of Western civilisation. An account of a phenomenon should aim to understand its specificity. A failure to distinguish between genocide and other forms of violence, oppression and suffering in modern society means evading giving an actual account of the phenomenon by both erasing its specificity and minimising its importance at the same time.

The narrative and mythologisation of civilisation

The story of modernity and its use as a lens through which to understand societies both modern and otherwise is a metanarrative holding together various theoretical approaches, the most important of which are:

- Approaching the history of thought as if it were an ongoing struggle between reason and superstition;
- Max Weber’s idea of the course of modern history as a process of rationalisation;
- Psychoanalysis’s promise to uncover the instincts hiding deep inside man, i.e. the animal that lives inside him, and the idea that modernity is a process of taming those instincts;

⁵ See in particular Chapter 3 of Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (London: General Press, 2018).

- The idealisation of man's control of society and his emancipation from exploitation in society in Karl Marx and other writers;
- The German sociologist Elias's approach to modern history as a civilisational process of discipline appearing above all else in the excision of violence from people's daily lives.⁽⁶⁾
- Genocide and any theoretical attempt to understand it tell a different story about modernity. Without the tools of modernity – bureaucracy, routine, accounting, budgeting, and all the other rational instruments by which society is managed – the Holocaust would not have been possible, even if the ideology calling for extermination and the will to put it into practice had been present. For Bauman these are not mere tools, but also mean the reality of the separation between the agent and his ethics in the moment of action. Bureaucracy's speed, clarity, strict hierarchy, rational utilization of resources and minimisation of costs are the same elements that made the genocide possible. These characteristics of modern bureaucracy are taken from Weber via thinkers like Charles Wright Mills.⁽⁷⁾

The genocide that sought to exterminate the Jews, as one of a number of possible choices, was 'a *product of routine bureaucratic procedures*: means-ends calculus, budget balancing, universal rule application.'⁽⁸⁾ The decision itself was not taken from the beginning, but was the result of accumulated experience and repeated attempts to find rational solutions to the problems produced by the separation of Jews from society – in Hitler's language, to cure society of the Jewish sickness by quarantine, then exile – and later the problems of ghettos and camps into which the Jews were herded: hunger, sickness, disease. Ultimately the sole bureaucratic solution, after the dehumanisation of Jews in these neighbourhoods, was to move them to labour camps, the extermination of those unable to work, and finally universal extermination. Each stage was a solution to problems that had emerged in its predecessor, which 'had' to be overcome.

The Nazi war crimes tribunal – particularly the trial of Adolf Eichmann, given a famous intellectual treatment by the German-Jewish thinker Hannah Arendt – did not demonstrate that the Nazi criminals were a gang of sadist criminals or lunatics entirely lacking in conscience or morals. Rather, the cross-examination of the accused at the Nuremberg trials showed that they were mostly 'normal people' in their family lives and social relations, who conducted themselves normally and with ethical sense in their direct environment and in their relationships with those close to them. Were a student of Nazism or genocide to encounter one of them at some social occasion, in the street or at a cafe, they would be unlikely to guess that they were in fact criminals who spent their working day committing horrific crimes at their 'workplace'. Most SS officers could probably have passed the necessary exams to enlist in any modern army in the world. And if the Nazi regime had won the war, perhaps the horrific acts they committed would not be considered a great ethical mishap, and the criminals would have been accusers and not defendants.

6 Bauman, p. 24.

7 Ibid., p. 26.

8 Ibid., p. 17.



If the perpetrators of the crime were not deviants or sadist perverts, this raises the question: how is it possible for 'normal' people to commit such crimes? To answer this question, we need to answer another, more precise question: how, practically, can morals be neutralised or suppressed when dealing with the other? Or, as Arendt puts it in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, how is it possible to overcome the 'animal pity' that all people feel when they see physical suffering?⁽⁹⁾ Arendt thus assumes the existence of a natural pity or mercy that is almost physical and tied to a physical aversion to barbarity encouraging sympathy with the victim. This implies that there is a natural instinctual basis to the rejection of physical torture and abuse – just as there is a natural basis, in my view, for aspirations to freedom, i.e. the freedom to move the body and the impulse to resist restrictions on its movement (even if this only becomes civil or social freedom when it is joined with consciousness and awareness). There is a natural basis to the rejection of restrictions – the pain caused by the binding of the human body and the restriction of its movement, which only becomes a desire for freedom with the element of consciousness, which begins with recognition of the absence of other freedoms. In my view, it is possible to consider the lack of aversion to physical assaults and torture a pathological deviance. But that is not what we are discussing here – indeed, we are assuming the existence of such an aversion in the actor, and asking how it was neutralised or silenced.

The street brawls triggered by incitement and mobilisation did not succeed in neutralising this ethical sense; the chaotic violence of the SA's assaults earned society's distaste, especially after SA thugs attacked Jewish shops during *Kristallnacht*. These violations were met with revulsion from local German society and the victims' neighbours, and even solidarity with the victims. The violence of streets and alleyways did not prove an effective method of putting Nazi theory into practice by separating Jews from society. What *did* prove effective, however, was routine, bureaucratically institutionalised repression within the regime: violence carried out procedurally, on command, with discipline and order. It is important to note that this unchecked thuggery made the SA seem like a mere gang affiliated with the Nazi party, making it easy for non-partisan German observers, making it easy for non-partisan German bystanders to view them with contempt. But when the state itself took responsibility, the importance of personal opinion and taste fell back before the sovereign state.

Bauman cites Herbert Kelman's comment that 'the moral inhibitions against violent atrocities tend to be eroded once three conditions are met, singly or together; the violence is *authorized* (by official orders coming from the legally entitled quarters), actions are *routinized* (by rule-governed practices and exact specification of roles), and the victims of the violence are *dehumanized* (by ideological definitions and indoctrinations).'⁽¹⁰⁾ Bauman discusses all three phenomena in detail in the course of the book, dedicating different chapters to each of them. The fundamental idea is taken from Kelman:

- In the modern bureaucratic system, in which orders received from above free the individual of any responsibility, since the individual can easily convince themselves without much outside

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), pp. 105 - 106.

Arendt approaches the matter differently in the same part of her text, believing that those implicated in the crime believed themselves to be part of a great project the likes of which only get an opportunity to succeed once every thousand years. That is, she emphasises the importance of brainwashing and belief in the idea itself.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34. C.f. Herbert C. Kelman, "Violence without Moral Restraint", *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 29 (1973), pp. 29 - 61.

help that they are simply doing their job, following orders, and rising to the task at hand. In bureaucracy carrying out orders is considered totally natural, even virtuous.

- The routinisation of work through systemic practices and a precise division of labour help to neutralise ethics by making orders a formulaic affair, with rules regulating their implementation to the point that the idea of injustice itself disappears from the scene. The management of people comes to be like the management of things: their movement from the train to detention and extermination camps is conducted like the movement of goods. The important thing is numerical calculations – load, space, number of people who can be squashed into a car, how to get rid of their waste, the amount of air they need to be able to breathe. In the laboratories in which the gas used for extermination was developed, the cost and efficiency of the chemicals used and how fast they would kill were calculated. The corollary of the facelessness of the human victim and the precise division of labour among the actors is the disappearance of a perpetrator bearing responsibility for the crime. Every person is a cog in the machine, barely bearing responsibility for the small part that he conducts according to his orders, which itself appears entirely harmless and non-lethal.
- Finally, the victim is demonised. This is the main condition that must be met in order to keep the wheel turning and the conscience neutralised. Demonisation means stripping the victim of human qualities by means of categories and definitions that divide society into different human types. This is a process that has gone on since the beginning of modernity, but the categories become very dangerous when backed by ideologies that categorise the 'other' as essentially different and inferior, or that consider the other alien to the point that it is difficult to empathise with them. Normal people – who in their daily lives, in their families or their professional surroundings, may be 'normal' or 'average' or even particularly 'moral' – thus become parties to a crime.
- It is possible to see all three processes as facets of the 'rationalisation' of modern state institutions, whether in their relationship with themselves or in their management of society and the economy. This means that the process of neutralising morals is part of what we might consider the 'civilisational process' or 'civilisational disciplining', or rationalisation. There are types of moral neutralisation that fall short of participating in genocide; daily life sees various more subtle forms take place within these institutions. The neutralisation of morals necessary for a crime of this order to take place thus does not take place all in one go. Instead, morals are gradually stifled as part of the process of rationalisation that all modern institutions go through.

Bauman is far from careful here. He takes no precautions to ensure that the reader does not conclude that premodernity was a moral paradise. Indeed, a reader might easily arrive at such a conclusion – but this is about as far from the truth as it is possible to get. Postmodern writers generally fail to place sufficient emphasis on the genuine progress modernity represented before discussing how it generated its antitheses. In previous ages morality was unrelated to individual freedom and universal humanity; it was a matter of organic community or religion, of the duties of the individual



attendant on his social position, generally determined by birth. In premodern times it was these values – not proto-ethics like a sense of human pity – that dictated to the individual (if we can even use the term in this case) how he was to act. It was the emancipation or assumed emancipation of the modern individual from the values of premodernity that encouraged an expectation that he would do his *moral duty* as dictated to him by his conscience, or act in accordance with natural or sublime moral inclinations. Hence the disappointment and shock when people do not behave in this way, and Bauman's need to explain how genocide (the Holocaust) could take place in modernity. He does not acknowledge that what makes him so critical, even condemning, of modernity is not ethics in general, but actually modern, so-called universal ethics.

Racism and Jewish exceptionalism

The belief that the Holocaust is a continuation of German and non-German populist racism, or that it was a seasonal flare-up or an inevitable outcome of this racism, is entirely incorrect. From the moment that the Nazis came to power, and throughout the acts of genocide as a whole, there was no popular disturbance in which Germans attacked their Jewish neighbours as had happened during the Middle Ages. To the contrary, normal people reacted to the SA's actions on *Kristallnacht* with revulsion and sympathy for the Jews. The genocide was thus not a mere continuation of medieval racist practices or an expression of Christian religious hostility to Judaism, or of that fear of the foreign and the unknown. But it is certainly true that the aforementioned instruments of modernity did make use of fear of the unfamiliar other, and exploited existing anti-Jewish prejudices in various societies in order to demonise them in modernity.

The importance of Jews' status as the other in Christian societies cannot be downplayed. The image of Jews transmitted through popular culture, of medieval provenance, facilitated development of a similar image in modernity, despite the different features of such images in societies in which religious culture dominates. In modernity, with the emergence of the class struggle in early capitalism and the fall of feudalism and the old middle classes, the romanticism of a return to a more intimate past, and the emergence of ideologies and ideological conflict, it was possible for the lower classes to accuse Jews of representing unproductive capital (banking capital, just as Jews had been stereotyped as usurers in the Middle Ages). Conservative classes, meanwhile, accused Jews of being the source of cultural and social degradation, and the source of dissolute ideas opposed to the family and the church. Every side accused the Jews of responsibility for whatever they considered the greatest danger. In inter-state wars, which came to take a nationalist character, it was easy to accuse Jews of treason – because they were pacifistic, or because they lived on the borders between nationalities. In the conflict between socialism and capitalism, some Romantic Socialists accused Jews of embodying commerce and capital, while the ruling classes charged them with being the driving force behind Communism.

Bauman's analysis is based on his intimate knowledge of Polish society and the conditions the Jews lived under. He sees the Jews as an intermediary community. They were not landowners, but served as a buffer protecting them by acting as their agents in direct contact with the peasantry; peasants thus directed their animosity towards them. The landowners themselves, meanwhile, treated Jewish moneylenders and managers as commoners: backward, unclean, ignorant and greedy. Jews were thus simultaneously isolated from the general populace and from the aristocrats and landowners, but nonetheless continued to fulfil an important role. Separation was thus dictated by the need for a particular kind of contact.⁽¹¹⁾

The association of modernity and Jews' acquisition of equal rights in advanced societies (the UK, France, Germany) provoked the suspicion of those classes that had lost out in modernity: the old middle classes that had collapsed, the peasants and the feudal aristocracy. They accused Jews of being responsible for the collapse of the old hierarchies that had served as the guarantor of values and morals, and thus simultaneously for general social and moral decay. It was easy for them to believe that the Jews had either benefited from or were responsible for their woes. And as I have already noted, we can easily find evidence of anti-Semitism even among the Romantic Socialists opposed to capitalist development, whose socialism was based on opposition to modernisation and not simply to capitalism itself (e.g. Fourier, Proudhon).

The modern state addressed Jews' legal status via top-down decrees from the highest organs of power. Historically, political authorities – particularly those who might be considered enlightened monarchs – had been the only guarantors that Jews would be protected from the anger of the Church or of the mob. This made them appear as an extension of the state. Jews generally depended on the state's 'generosity' and its need for their services as financial middlemen, advisors or as in some cases intermediaries in communication with other states. Liberalism, however, promised them a legal foundation independent of the goodwill of politicians.

Bauman cites Arendt's definition of the Jews as 'a non-national element in a world of growing or existing nations'.⁽¹²⁾ Although Jewish communities acted as communities or nations, they were non-national 'nations' in nationalist societies: a nation transcending nationalities in nationalist societies. This is one of the key reasons for nationalist movements' antipathy towards Jews, even those who integrated into their societies and modern national states. Jews seemed like an internal organ whose connections with outside were nonetheless never broken, even in times of war.

According to Bauman, Jews in the pre-modern era were one of various differentiated and unequal communities within non-nationalist and non-homogenous societies. There was nothing unique about their distinctiveness (this is not entirely true, because they were the only non-Christian group in a Christian world). With the beginning of modernity, however, Jewish isolation became a problem: there was no alternative to subordinating them like others to industrialisation, rationalisation,

11 Ibid., p. 57.

12 Ibid., p. 53.



technological planning, administration and surveillance.⁽¹³⁾ In the dialectic of distinctiveness and homogeneity, religion was no longer a criterion. They had to move to what Arendt calls the new religion of modernity: racial identity.

Baumann distinguishes strictly between racism and xenophobia ('heterophobia') or anxiety triggered by the unknown. Racism is an oppositional hostility in which feelings of hatred and resentment are tied to separation from the other. It is different not in the intensity of feeling or the kind of justifications by which it justifies itself but in its use of the strategies of various sciences – architecture, horticulture, medicine – in an attempt to lend itself a rational character. Racism also imagines an 'ideal' reality stripped of the diversity of current reality that racists find so unpleasant.⁽¹⁴⁾ The practical importance of racism appears only in the context of this conceptualisation of the ideal society and the intention to work towards its implementation. In the case of the Holocaust, the plan was to establish a society in which the spirit of the German people would rule triumphant. There was no space for the Jews in such a society: they could not participate for genetic reasons, a fact unchangeable by integration, education, or even conversion, because it was a matter of race – of blood.

The emergence of racism coincided with the development of racial theories which drew on biology and evolutionary theory by applying them to human communities, and with the development of genetics and public health ('national health' in the language of Nazism). Scientists aspired to discover healthy bloodlines by excising unhealthy and dangerous elements and strengthening the healthy elements in society, as one does in horticulture by ridding gardens of weeds. The mentally and physically healthy were to be encouraged to reproduce, and those suffering from genetic diseases, disabilities or learning difficulties sterilised and prevented from reproducing – and ultimately, exterminated. From this perspective Judaism became, for the Nazis, a kind of untreatable illness.

Ideology was projected onto scientific thinking, and vice versa: it was now possible for Hitler to talk about the 'discovery of the Jewish virus', or the social illnesses that had caused the Jewish virus, approaching Jews in the language of medical science and genetics (exterminate, counteract, sterilise). As with all lethal diseases, prevention began with isolation – i.e. quarantine. The first step was not to exterminate the Jews as a whole but to isolate them from German society, to compel Germans to boycott their Jewish neighbours, and then later to gather them together in detention centres. It was not a matter of sin or virtue. Tumours and weeds are not sinners: they cannot repent or be punished, because they are living according to their nature. And it is equally natural that they resist their excision, even though it is not a punishment but a necessity. The same applied to the nature of the Jewish race. The use of scientific language to diagnose the problem (the sickness that has beset society) and prescribe a cure necessarily facilitates the neutralisation of morals.

The site of this racist ideologisation in the service of genocide was the government, its employees and its soldiers – and *not* popular mobilisation against the Jews. Despite the huge resources dedicated to

¹³ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

racist propaganda and incitement and its effect on public opinion, this was not a major factor. The government thus ultimately set about isolating, detaining, massing and exterminating on its own. Bauman demonstrates this point by drawing on the work of historians like John R. Sabini, who says that *Kristallnacht* was 'a pogrom, an instrument of terror ... typical of the long-standing tradition of European anti-Semitism not the new Nazi order, not the systematic extermination of European Jewry. Mob violence is a primitive, ineffective technique of extermination. It is an effective method of terrorizing a population, keeping people in their place, perhaps even of forcing some to abandon their religious or political convictions, but these were never Hitler's aims with regard to the Jews: he meant to destroy them.'⁽¹⁵⁾

Bauman tirelessly reiterates that there is a difference between the popular xenophobia that serves racist discrimination on the one hand and the organised crimes of the kind represented by the Holocaust on the other. He believes that conflation of the two erases differentiation and obscures the distinction of the phenomenon: 'In the initiation and perpetuation of the Holocaust, traditional heterophobia played but an auxiliary role. The truly indispensable factors lay elsewhere, and bore at the utmost a merely historical relation to more familiar forms of group resentment. The *possibility* of the Holocaust was rooted in certain universal features of modern civilization: its *implementation* on the other hand, was connected with a specific and not at all universal relationship between state and society.'⁽¹⁶⁾ This is an important point to stress, particularly given inclinations within sociology and psephology to cite popular prejudices and beliefs as the source of racial discrimination while ignoring discriminatory practices pursued by elites and the state. But it may require modification today, particularly in democracies where such preconceptions affect how positive a response populist politicians' propaganda receives in elections and thus influence policy by bringing these politicians to power.

Bauman cites the well-known historian of the Holocaust Raoul Hilberg: 'Wouldn't you be happier if I had been able to show you that all the perpetrators were crazy?'⁽¹⁷⁾ The implication of course is that we should not be happy but rather alarmed, because they were not crazy. News that the Tutsis and Hutus have massacred one another and the victims number in the millions, or that the Syrian or Iraqi regime has used poison gas against its own people, carries little weight in modern Western societies who have turned their backs on the Holocaust. Such 'barbarous crimes', considered 'external to modernity', serve only to increase their self-confidence; after all, such a thing could never happen in a modern Western society! (This confidence may have been shaken a little by the massacres conducted by the Serbs in Bosnia). However, Bauman – like Henry Feingold and Leo Cooper, among others – argues that the ideology and system that paved the way to Auschwitz are still present in modern society. The sovereign state that claims the right to commit crimes against its citizens and subjects still exists. The international system defends states' right to sovereignty and their right to do whatever they please to their own citizens. This is to say that genocide is always possible. Bauman

15 Ibid., p. 75.

16 Ibid., p. 82.

17 Ibid., p. 83.



does however describe Kren and Rapoport's assertion that 'the modern state may do anything it wishes to those under its control. There is no moral-ethical limit which the state cannot transcend if it wishes to do so, because there is no moral-ethical power higher than the state'⁽¹⁸⁾ as an exaggeration; the modern state's activities do not reach the extent of the Holocaust phenomenon, which has unique traits distinguishing it from the mere violent exercise of sovereignty.

In his *Homo Sacer* Giorgio Agamben concludes that the concentration camp is the epitome of the exercise of totalitarian sovereignty in the modern state. This is a model of the totalitarian state in which politics becomes biopolitics, i.e. concerned with the management and control of the human body to the point that it is dominated by preoccupation with the body: its detention, torture, murder.⁽¹⁹⁾ Agamben finds Arendt and Foucault's lack of interest in detention as an interpretation of biopolitics and that totalitarianism whose origins Arendt analysed in her famous book⁽²⁰⁾ to be strange: 'only because politics in our age had been entirely transformed into biopolitics was it possible for politics to be constituted as totalitarian politics to a degree hitherto unknown.'⁽²¹⁾ He writes that from the perspective of the comprehensiveness of politics, the transition from democracy to totalitarianism is not revolutionary but gradual: in both cases politics is totalitarian and penetrates all spheres of life.⁽²²⁾ He bases this conclusion on Karl Löwith, tracing the development of the concept of Homo Sacer – the 'sacred person' who, according to Roman tradition, may be killed without fear of retribution but cannot be sacrificed to the gods,⁽²³⁾ i.e. is a combination of sacred and profane. Agamben does not notice this despite several Semitologists having previously observed that in Semitic religions a *sacred* place is also a *forbidden* place.⁽²⁴⁾ The same applies to sacred entities that cannot be sacrificed. This is also what Adolf Otto is alluding to when he says that the sacred can also be a source of fear and terror.

In any case, Agamben moves – albeit not decisively – from this term to the term 'bare life'.⁽²⁵⁾ The bareness of life and its loss of any protection manifests in the state of exception that the sovereign is able to declare to repress its subjects. Such is its power that Carl Schmitt considered the right to declare a state of exception to be the essence of the modern state. Neither Agamben nor Bauman are saying much by characterising Nazism as an absolute state of exception, since Walter Benjamin had already written on the issue several decades before from the perspective of the oppressed: 'The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "emergency situation" in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history which corresponds to this. Then it will become clear that the task before us is the introduction of a real state of emergency; and our position in the struggle against

18 Ibid., p. 87.

19 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Daniel Heller-Roazen (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 71 - 4.

20 Ibid, pp. 119 - 120.

21 Ibid, p. 120.

22 Ibid, p. 121.

23 Ibid, pp. 75 - 80.

24 I discuss this in my *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*, where I analyse the relationship between the sacred and the profane as a shared root of all religions.

25 Ibid., p. 83.

Fascism will thereby improve.'⁽²⁶⁾ Schmitt himself understood this when he wrote that the essence of sovereignty is the power to impose a state of emergency, i.e. that Nazism's practices were ultimately a total embodiment of this principle. Like any thinker attempting a daring formulation of the essence of the phenomenon, Schmitt, an ultraconservative jurist, presented a ready-made foundation for critiquing the modern state (including the concept of sovereignty). All that some critical thinkers who have followed him have done is apply his analysis in reverse.

Modern genocide is different from the mass killings that sometimes occurred in classical warfare. Genocide is a means to an end. It is derived from an ultimate purpose. It is a step that must be taken in order to reach a higher goal. It is one aspect of social engineering seeking to bring about an ideal social system. Genocide is the product of an approach that considers peoples to be raw material to be developed and improved, whose spirit must be discovered and harmony with that spirit assured to design and plan society and state and treat their ills – in short, of social and even eugenic engineering. Genocide is, according to Bauman, one of the tasks of a ruler, analogous to those of a gardener. Bureaucracy is capable of carrying out genocide. In order to do so, it must coincide with another one of modernity's great innovations: social engineering in pursuit of an ideal society. Genocide is the product of these two modern inventions.⁽²⁷⁾

Genocide, the logic of bureaucracy and hierarchical and functional division of labour

Bauman then discusses the factor he considers most important to the Holocaust: 'the typically modern, technological- bureaucratic patterns of action and the mentality they institutionalize, generate, sustain and reproduce.'⁽²⁸⁾ The key point is that contrary to the belief that modernity has not succeeded in getting rid of the 'eternal beast hiding just beneath the skin of the socially drilled being', which is the foundation of Hobbes' state of nature and the sovereign's role in disciplining it, Bauman believes that there is another way of understanding what happened: that 'the civilizing process has succeeded in substituting artificial and flexible patterns of human conduct for natural drives, and hence made possible a scale of inhumanity and destruction which had remained inconceivable as long as natural predispositions guided human action.'⁽²⁹⁾ This is to say that Bauman believes that if mass murder were a matter of human barbarity or instinct then the Holocaust would not have been possible: it became possible precisely because natural instincts had been substituted by artificial and flexible patterns of human conduct.

26 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), Harry Zohn (trans.) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. IV, 1938 - 1940* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2003), p 392.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

29 *Ibid.*.



In his account of hierarchical and functional division of labour, which as I have previously noted is borrowed from Kelman, Bauman says that '[u]se of violence is most efficient and cost-effective when the means are subjected to solely instrumental-rational criteria, and thus dissociated from moral evaluation of the ends.'⁽³⁰⁾ Bureaucracy is unique in its ability to separate means from moral evaluation of the ends, a separation that represents the essence of rationalisation. The bureaucratic separation between morals and ends is based on two parallel processes: the *functional* division of labour, including the division between superiors and subordinates, and the 'substitution of technical for a moral responsibility'.⁽³¹⁾ Machiavelli long ago made the point that this is the essence of politics – isolating means from morality and subordinating them solely to ends. Technical responsibility could not replace moral responsibility without a precise division of labour whereby the responsibility of the expert or the chemical weapons factory worker comes to be limited to the technical aspects of a specific task rather than the chemical weapon as a whole. This accords with what some consider the instinct to perfect one's work, which is strengthened by factors such as workers' weakness in comparison to their bosses and eagerness to be promoted or win approval and praise – which lead to competition with co-workers in the performance of tasks.

If neutralisation of morals *vis-a-vis* means is the first product of the logic of division of labour, the second is the abstraction of ends from human qualities and their expression in purely technical and morally neutral terms. This is a matter of language and terminology: the use of the language of calculation and quantities, weights and measures to talk about human beings driven into gas chambers or crammed into train carriages on their way to death. It is a matter of technical language stripping humans of their humanity, within the rationalisation process.

For a genocide to be carried out not just the victim's humanity but also the criminal's must be neutralised: the humanity of both is an obstacle to effective execution. In this case the suppression or repression of a perpetrator's humanity itself becomes a 'form of suffering' in the eyes of both perpetrators and wider society, the 'self-sublimation' and 'emotionlessness' required to 'carry out the mission'. It is recast as the virtue of 'strength of character'. In societies in which regime ideology is hegemonic we find widespread sympathy not for victims' suffering but for *soldiers'* suffering – because they 'suffer' when they kill. We know this phenomenon well from the media, art and culture that Western states produce when occupying foreign countries or fighting colonial wars abroad. The suffering of the individual soldier, as it appears in the culture prevailing in the media and the cinema, becomes the central issue, acquiring more importance than the suffering of his victims. Art and literature concerns itself with various subjects – soldiers' hesitation, desire to keep to the human principles 'with which they were raised', the conflict between carrying out their patriotic duty (making killing inevitable) and human sympathy; Israeli political culture is a particularly hammy example of this. In this particular case it is difficult to distinguish between a soldier *actually* suffering and his merely *pretending* to suffer. Regardless, the suffering of the victims is marginalised.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

³¹ Ibid..

Arendt shows that perpetrators' pity for or sympathy with victims' suffering is neutralised by a process of inversion: it becomes *their* suffering at witnessing such horrible scenes, *their* sacrifice in the service of an idea that they believe in.⁽³²⁾

No sooner had the Nazi extermination machine begun its work than its independent internal dynamics began to shift away from the original goal towards new goals. Isolation became concentration in one place and concentration ultimately became extermination. In the last year of the war, when military defeat was assured, the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Problem' – the creation of a homogenous Aryan society – no longer had any meaning. But the machine nonetheless continued to run. It had acquired a routine, an internal order and dynamism. The advent of the war's final year led to the conclusion not that its work should stop but that it had to be completed as quickly as possible, despite the fact that its original aim was now meaningless. It was according to the same logic that SS officers prevented German generals from employing Jewish professionals who were still alive, and sorely needed, in military operations. Genocide had its own logic, independent of the logic of victory or efficiency. Mass executions of Hungarian and Romanian Jews and their rapid transport to the death camps only became widespread once the Eastern Front was mere miles away. Rather than dedicating all their efforts to fighting the Soviets, resources were set aside for the extermination of the Jews, even though it was clear that Germany would not rule these countries for long.

The problem of the sciences in modernity is that they are susceptible to use in the service of any government, no matter how oppressive. Science played a dark role in the Holocaust. Bauman is not satisfied merely with blaming the separation between science and morality. He goes further, pointing to the negative role played by science in encouraging scepticism towards any thinking based on standards, especially religion and morality. The emancipatory aspect of the sciences – their emancipation from the bonds of religion and prevailing norms towards an understanding of phenomena according to their own laws – does not, he thinks, merit noting. He concentrates instead on showing that science is given, for the same reason, to treat moralists with contempt and derision. This tendency ultimately led the bearers of the scientific message to lose their moral insight, the bravery necessary to risk taking moral or ethical positions – because in their circles and institutions such positions were branded 'unscientific'. Many scientists did distinguish between the separation of science and normative values in the field of research and the importance of ethics and even religion outside this field. But most did not ask about the tasks they carried out in the factories or laboratories that helped produce the genocide. Indeed, some were excited by the prospect of carrying out medical experiments on detainees so as not to miss the opportunity to use humans rather than mice, allowing science's understanding of microbes, viruses, vaccinations, medicines etc to advance more expeditiously. But we should not forget that in the last instance, this is a problem of morality, not of science.

The 'cult of rationality' in modernity did not prevent such great crimes occurring. But neither did churches raise any objection, to say the least, to the organised barbarity of the Holocaust. They stayed

32 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), pp. 105 - 106.



silent. Bauman recognises and notes this,⁽³³⁾ but he does not stop to consider the implied objection this raises to his attribution of primary blame to rationalism: churches are hardly hotbeds of reason-worship. Fear and a desire for self-preservation were in this case common to many scientists and churches, and likewise what we might describe as a conservative tendency wary of opposition, loyal to inherited tradition and based fundamentally on social position and belonging to the establishment – as well as awareness of the distance separating them from the victims, given that they belonged to another religion or were strangers. But the conservatism born of holding a position in the scientific, church or state establishment – made up of personal and familial interest, habit and habituation, self-preservation, a distaste for opposition because it is ‘futile’ or because of a conviction that *status quo* is always better than risking change – places very effective limits on courage, and is not given sufficient attention not only in this book.

Bauman states that the first sin is the collapse of democracy and the monopolisation of absolute power, meaning a lack of oversight and accountability. Although he does not mention freedom of expression, which enables people to object without fear of punishment, this freedom is part of oversight, accountability, and non-monopolisation of power. German democracy was short-lived, and was unable to give democratic traditions deep roots or replace the existing structure of control and power. The ‘anarchy’ produced by a short-lived democracy which fails to lay the foundations of a new system produces both fear and a deeply-felt desire for stability. This makes society prepared to accept a regime even more autocratic than the autocratic regime that existed before this ephemeral democracy justified by this fear of chaos and instability. Certain Arab societies will be able to conceptualise what I am talking about easily, especially given developments during the counterrevolutionary period following the revolutions of 2011 – specifically the 2013 military coup in Egypt. Resurgent despotism is worse than complacent despotism because of its vindictive tendency, and because it exploits people’s fear of chaos and insecurity and their desire for stability to push through more authoritarian measures and crimes unprecedented in their scope.

Bauman concludes that instrumental reason and the loss of ethical insight were two of the most important factors in the Holocaust, and still exist today.

The surrender of victims as a precursor to their moral corruption

Bauman gives a daring treatment of this topic in Chapter 5 of the book, titled *Soliciting the Co-operation of the Victims*. When the violence used is released from any bonds, colossal, broad in scope, ultimately reaching the point of the victim’s surrender, the result is that the demographic targeted by the genocide is stripped of any capacity to continue resistance; the victims become their executioners’ hostages to the point of being their playthings. This is facilitated by the destruction of the leadership and authorities of the community in such a way that it suffers internal collapse. Its leaders, whether traditional or supposedly new, become employees in the apparatus of extermination – not as criminal

33 Ibid., p. 111.

perpetrators, but as victims, whose sole aim in life is survival. Under conditions of genocide the will to survive seems to be no more than realism. Survival itself becomes, for victims, an end justifying all 'rational' means, which are in turn abstracted from ethics.

The Nazis insisted on holding elections in the ghettos, creating Jewish Councils (*Judenräte*) and appointing ghetto leadership; having killed or neutralised many of the Jewish communities' traditional leaders, they found themselves in need of a new local authority to work with. Ghetto neighbourhoods needed people to run them – the Nazis did not have sufficient resources to run all the Jewish neighbourhoods, or the necessary German manpower willing to tolerate the deprivation, poverty and filth (all that is repulsive in modernity) therein without the provision of any services. Ultimately the Jewish Councils' services were required even in the administration and bureaucratic organisation of the genocide itself: preparing lists of those to be transported to the camps and lying about why they were being transported. The Holocaust was an extreme case of a phenomenon that appears entirely normal in daily life and does not necessarily lead to genocide – 'the ability of modern, rational, bureaucratically organized power to induce actions functionally indispensable to its purposes while jarringly at odds with the vital interests of the actors.'⁽³⁴⁾ This is very true of the Jewish Councils, who were victims of this bureaucracy and who carried out acts unwillingly with ends they did not want.

The separation of the Jews from their environment allowed the Nazis to isolate their victims to the point that there was no avenue of appeal whatsoever. Jews were totally at the mercy of the Nazi authorities. As such, cooperation came to represent the sole possibility of preserving at least the delusion of survival, in the face of a simple binary choice: death or survival. Survival – that is, simply remaining alive – was not achieved by appealing for help or by resisting; this was impossible and meant certain death. Cooperating with the executioner was the only thing that offered a chance, albeit a slim one. The choice between death and survival does not simply produce a particular kind of realism. This realism also gradually expands the scope of collaboration, ultimately reaching the point of sacrificing others on the principle that to sacrifice many may at least save a few: the collaborators themselves and those close to them or those they believe deserve to be rescued. From this 'realistic' perspective, cowed and stripped of morality, this is better than *everyone* dying. The idea of not cooperating in the killing of those they are supposedly responsible for at any price – or that universal refusal to cooperate may ultimately make it much more difficult for the killing to take place but may also mean his own death – simply does not occur to those who think in this manner. And so Jewish Council members prepared detailed lists of those to be sent to the gas chambers and produced bureaucratic records of the kind Germany is so famous for detailing victims and their property. This is without going into the activities of the Jewish ghetto police (the *Kapos*), which would be beyond our scope here to discuss.

When the genocide of the Jews of Eastern Europe was conducted, other Jews believed that they would not meet with the same treatment. During the period in which they had achieved real

34 Ibid., p. 122.



integration into German society, German Jews saw themselves as Germans; the same applied in the Netherlands and France. The delusion that 'what happened to them will not happen to me' also contributes to the non-development of a strategy of resistance. Generally elites collaborate in the production of this delusion. Bauman mentions, quoting Jack Adler, that the strategy of French Jews in September 1940 was based on the premise that immigrant Jews were the problem, that it was possible to convince the Vichy government to keep French Jews alive if they only gave up socially and politically unwanted immigrant Jews to the Nazis.⁽³⁵⁾ Here Bauman points the finger again at rationalism, since he considers this behaviour the result of a rationalist calculation whose goal is self-preservation, even if that means collaborating with the executioner in sacrificing others. For those at risk of extermination such rational calculations abruptly supplant moral judgements as they think of how to ensure their own survival.

Protecting oneself seemed a logical, rational goal. Once this became the aim and standard of behaviour, and once the executioners realised this, the cost of survival rose daily. Survival required greater and greater cooperation. In some cases it required making difficult choices, as in the city of Sokoly on Easter Day 1942, when the Jewish Council were ordered to select all healthy and strong Jewish men and send them to the city or else be shot; the Council carried out their orders within fifteen minutes. Such scenes played out again and again across Europe, with Jewish Councils electing to postpone their own deaths and the deaths of their relatives and friends.⁽³⁶⁾

This standard ultimately came to entirely dominate the ghettos, cancelling out all reciprocal moral obligations. 'Cooperation of the victims with the designs of their persecutors was made easier by the moral corruption of the victims. By facing them with choices in which the 'fittest', who survived, could only emerge from the test with soiled hands, the designers made sure that with the passage of time the ghetto population would turn more and more into a company of accomplices to murder, and with it moral insensitivity and callousness would grow -- to the detriment, and possibly extinction, of all brakes that normally constrain the pressure of the naked instinct of self-preservation.'⁽³⁷⁾ Here Bauman does not notice his own use of the word 'instinct' and how different that is from rational calculation. Survival instinct is not an invention of modernity and nor is justifying means by ends when that end is survival: survival justifies means considered immoral in other cases in which man is not fighting for his life, in modernity and otherwise. The struggle between survival instinct and human pity (and other aspects of what might be called natural ethics) probably does not distinguish modernity from other periods. Rationalism generally can serve instinct just as it can serve the transcendence of instinct when placed in the service of moral standards. There is no contradiction between rationality and morals, in my view. The question is what rationality serves. Bauman does not discuss this issue, so we will not consider it here at length.

To summarise, the moral corruption of the Jewish Councils grew steadily worse and the executioners succeeded to a great extent in stripping victims of their humanity. Their racist ideas became a self-

35 Jacques Adler, *The Jews of Paris and the Final Solution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 223 - 224.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

37 *Ibid.*

fulfilling prophecy. The lack of morals and conscience and the selfishness and greed they considered to be characteristic of Jews were confirmed before their very eyes, as a result of the absolute violence they deployed against them, to the point that there was no escape.

Responsibility and obeying orders

Bauman next discusses the ethics of obedience, which he considers to bear much responsibility for crimes because they involve respect for orders and for the law without ethical evaluation of their content. Here he returns to Stanley Milgram's famous experiments on obedience conducted at Yale University, whose results were published in serialised form at the beginning of the 1970s. These experiments launched a debate that continues to this day regarding scientific ethics (but this is another matter).

In Milgram's experiment forty participants were ordered by an instructor to dispense painful electric shocks to another person. Participants generally obeyed the instructors, and indeed increased the charge when requested. Milgram demonstrated that participants' willingness increased the further they were (physically) from the other participant (the victim) and decreased the closer they were. He discovered a reciprocal relationship between technological effectiveness and distance from the ultimate effect of participants' actions on the one hand and willingness to hurt 'the victim' on the other. This distance can be more technical than physical – it may be a matter of not bearing responsibility for a decision, of carrying out a secondary task between the person who makes the decision and the person carrying it out (in the sense that an order is passed from one person to another). Thirty-seven of the forty participants reached the highest level of shock. In this system there is no 'second opinion', only a superior and a subordinate, authority and the recipient who carries out orders. When more than one opinion appeared among those giving orders, subordinates hesitated to carry them out. Milgram thus wrote that it was 'only when you have ... an authority who ... operates in a free field without countervailing pressures other than the victim's protests that you got the purest response to authority.'³⁸ It was thus crucial to destroy pluralism in Germany or in a country like the Soviet Union for the government to be able to wipe out its opposition. We might question this uncompromising conclusion, since there are other factors that may balance out the influence of pluralism, including the manufacturing of opinion and consensus and the denunciation of other opinions as treason – during a foreign occupation or the War on Terror, for example. At such times it becomes difficult for countervailing opinions to balance out the propaganda the government disseminates in order to cover up its activities.

Bauman ultimately arrives at a call for a sociological theory of ethics. He believes that unlike philosophy, sociology has not worked on ethical theory. Sociological narratives generally avoid allusions to ethical principles and have done since Max Weber; the most pre-Weberian sociology achieved (i.e. prior to its emergence as a science, in Montesquieu for example) was an instrumental account of ethics in the

38 Ibid., p. 166. See: Stanley Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World* (Reading, Mass.: Addison and Wesley, 1971),



sense that ethics have environmental or social causes, typically the needs of a given society. Ethics thus have benefits: fulfilling needs, suppressing instincts or disciplining behaviours in such a way as to allow the existence of a social life as some anthropologists see it. Durkheim objected to this interpretation, considering that the specificity of morals lay in their human force, independent of needs or rational calculations of the benefit they produced. And in my view Kant prefigured Durkheim in distinguishing morals by their *response to an obligation* regardless of benefits and cost-benefit analyses. Duty, i.e. the response to the question ‘what *should* I do?’, is an act capable of serving as a general law for others too. This is duty, which ties individual conscience to the group.

But Durkheim did not in fact abandon the idea that a moral system ultimately serves the survival of the community and preserves its identity, in the sense that it supports order’s ability to force compliance by implementing integration in society via punishment of offenders, because any society will impose limits on instincts and natural inclinations. This is also Freud’s approach.

Thus what is important is not the nature or essence of morals itself, whether or not universal morals exist, or morals and individual conscience, but the existence of some moral system in society. This ultimately means that every society has its own ethics that it needs and that are appropriate to its needs. This represents a return to the functionalist approach that justifies society imposing a moral order on individuals. Moral duty then becomes a duty to obey society. Even if this deserves to be called a moral theory rather than a sociological approach, it is incompatible with morality, because a moral position in many cases necessarily requires rebelling against what society demands through custom, law and social pressure. Indeed, this may be the test of a moral position in cases in which society enjoins immoral duties.

Bauman thus looks for another source of morality outside society, ultimately alighting on Emmanuel Levinas.⁽³⁹⁾ Levinas believes that responsibility – that is, responsibility towards the other – is the fundamental structure of subjectivity from which morals devolve. The other is an absolute and abstract other, not a specific other, and thus means *any* other. Responsibility for Levinas is, in my view, a form of compassion. It is not produced by a moral principle of a higher order or from a law and punishment. The subject does not consider this responsibility a burden, because it results from the construction of the subject as an active subject. The relationship is not reciprocal: I am responsible for the other without expecting like treatment even if I am in the greatest of need, because concern for the other results from my subjectivity. This model does not deviate much from Kant’s idea of duty: he affirms that duty in general (he does not call it ‘duty to the other’ or ‘responsibility’) is abstracted from any calculations of the results that carrying out that duty may have and of benefit that might be gained, thereby opposing an ethics of gain. But Levinas considers it inherent to the emergence of subjectivity and not a reflexive thought regarding some duty. I do not believe that Levinas here has produced a new moral theory in ethics or meta-ethics; rather, he is describing a form of ethics based on emotion. Generally I believe that his conclusions regarding the subject, the other and

³⁹ A philosopher very influential on Bauman, perhaps because of the similar paths their lives took: both were liberal Eastern-European Jews who worked in Western academia, and both lost relatives in the Holocaust.

responsibility fall outside philosophy despite the fact that he calls them metaphysical, affirming emotion and sympathy with the other⁽⁴⁰⁾ and that it is on responsibility towards that other that human subjectivity is built. This analysis is very close to the position that philosophy is the 'wisdom of love' (not a translation of 'love of wisdom', the Greek expression).

To my mind Levinas does not provide a solution to Bauman's efforts to identify a source for morals outside society, but simply presents a kind of 'sophisticated ethics' that is not itself a source of morals. It is not a theory but a presentation of a kind of ethics, and one which did not appear much in Levinas' own political positions; he remained to a great extent a conservative thinker and a French nationalist, and there is little evidence of him taking an important stand in opposing the suppression of *specific* others, or feeling 'responsibility' towards the victims of French colonialism, immigrants to France and so on.

Elsewhere Bauman describes Levinas as 'the greatest moral philosopher of the twentieth century'.⁽⁴¹⁾ He agrees that moral action is anything that follows a sense of responsibility – that is, as previously noted, responsibility for the other – without expecting any moral behavior from the other. This formulation, the lack of any expectation from the other, is exceedingly dangerous; it runs contrary to the thesis that there are pre-existing morals in human nature. So long as they exist, why should we not expect that others should also have them, at least on the balance of probability? Expecting such feelings from the other also makes him feel responsibility.

Bauman says, echoing Arendt in her *Eichmann in Paris* – and I am given to agree with him here – that we assume the existence of a fundamental human disgust at the killing or injury of others, a desire not to see despair, and an aversion to injustice. 'If this view is correct, or at least plausible, then the accomplishment of the Nazi regime consisted first and foremost in neutralizing the moral impact of the specifically human existential mode. It is important to know whether this success was related to the unique features of the Nazi movement and rule, or whether it can be accounted for by reference to more common attributes of our society, which the Nazis merely skilfully deployed in the service of Hitler's purpose.'⁽⁴²⁾ And as elsewhere in the book, he repeats that there is a growing consensus among historians that carrying out the Holocaust required the *neutralisation* of German popular emotion towards the Jews, not its *mobilisation*.

I will not go into the possibility here that an ethics might emerge that is not repulsed by killing or does not feel an aversion to physical torture because I assume, as stated above, that such cases represent deviancy or perversion and not an alternative ethics (an assumption which is not, of course, scientific). But there is another factor Bauman does not consider in this book: emotional fatigue and the normalisation of such scenes. In many cases feelings of hatred and a desire for revenge can

40 For a discussion of Levinas' contribution to a study of human emotion and the relationship with the other from a phenomenological standpoint close to that of Husserl, first translated to French by Levinas, see: John Drabinski's *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001). See especially Ch. IV and V.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 185.



overpower repulsion at physical torture, especially if ethics becomes communal and thus moral standards apply in a community of identity, especially when conflicts are considered wars between communities, and the other is demonized. It is necessary to study such issues, which are important to understanding the barbarity of sectarian and non-sectarian civil wars where bureaucratic action and the division of labour to the point of moral neutralisation are not very prominent. There is a recent phenomenon of people photographing themselves engaging in acts of torture, violence and collective punishment and then sharing the pictures on social media. We have seen video clips filmed by soldiers in the Syrian Army or in certain armed groups in which they torture people.

Bauman identifies the issue of distance and personal ignorance in cases of genocide: not seeing the crime committed yourself. It would not have been possible to neutralise morals and revulsion for death had systematic action not been taken to separate Jews from society so that the crime could take place out of sight and out of earshot of society. This action began with separation and ended by stripping Jews of their personal and individual traits, applying racist stereotypes of Jews *in the abstract* to *specific Jews*. One of the most important factors of the neutralisation of morals is stripping the other of his personality, humanity and distinctiveness.

Distance from the victim does not only arise from the erasure of his specific humanity, but also from the emergence of modern atomised man uninterested in anything outside his personal experience: his family, his neighbourhood, his place of work. Here Bauman quotes the famous German historian Hans Mommsen's definition of the 'anthropological dimension of the Holocaust' as 'the danger inherent in present-day industrial society of a process of becoming accustomed to moral indifference in regard to actions not immediately related to one's own sphere of experience.'⁽⁴³⁾ In this society specifically it is possible for the effect of human acts to extend to remote points in which moral vision entirely disappears, thanks to technology. The paradox is that there also emerges in this same society a citizen restricted to his own personal sphere. This separation of the victims from the province of the citizen, and his distance from the scene of the crime, contribute to the gagging of the moral imperative.

Bauman lists three elements of the management of morality (in fact the silencing and neutralisation of morals): 'social production of distance, which either annuls or weakens the pressure of moral responsibility; substitution of technical for moral responsibility, which effectively conceals the moral significance of the action; and the technology of segregation and separation, which promotes indifference to the plight of the Other which otherwise would be subject to moral evaluation and morally motivated response.'⁽⁴⁴⁾ In my view the third factor is not the product of modernity alone. It existed historically too in the division into tribes, religions and so on, and moral responsibility towards other tribes or peoples disappeared during wars or raiding parties; what was considered

43 Ibid., p. 193.

See: Hans Mommsen, 'Anti Jewish Politics and the Implications of the Holocaust', in *The Challenge of the Third Reich: The Adam von Trotta Memorial Lectures*, ed. Hedley Bull (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 136.

44 Ibid., p. 199 - 200.

unacceptable within the community was permissible outside it. Modernity "should have" overcome this by leaving behind these divisions – a development manifest in the emergence of human rights, international organizations etc. But modernity reproduced them on a distinct and higher level through racism on the one hand and state sovereignty on the other. This is why I do not consider this factor specifically to be a product of modernity or its failure.

Modernity and the Holocaust ends with a collection of postscripts summarising the main ideas in the book or reconsidering them in light of contemporary issues. The eighth chapter begins with an appendix titled 'Rationality and Shame', in which Bauman considers rulers' reliance on the rationality of victims and their calculations. When the majority do not respect law and order – the greatest fear of the South African regime, just as Israel feared the first Intifada – terror and repression will no longer be effective because the subject abandons the everyday calculations motivating him to keep to order and the rationality embodied in cost-benefit calculations. Terror and repression are only possible if the majority of victims obey a given social and legal order. Should they dare to breach this order, even if this is described as anarchy, it is impossible to control them.

One of the most important aspects of the Nazi heritage that continue to exist today is this 'consent to the authority of cost-effective calculus as an argument against ethical commandments – all these bear an eloquent evidence to the corruption the Holocaust exposed but did little, it appears, to discredit.'⁽⁴⁵⁾ Bauman encourages us to feel shame because this feeling may help to reclaim some element of the ethical dimension lost by perpetrators, victims and bystanders. The choice for him is not between shame and pride, but 'between the pride of morally purifying shame, and the shame of morally devastating pride.'⁽⁴⁶⁾ People are usually deterred by shame, and self-shame is even more important. But many may find retroactive shame of those who have committed an immoral act sufficing themselves with purification and feelings of shame to be unconvincing, because its effectiveness will perhaps be limited to purification, no more and no less.

In a system based on contradiction between rationality and ethical principles, humanity is the greatest loser. What Bauman does in this book is to draw out this contradiction. He does not show us a way for rationality to accord with morality. Those who helped victims and provided them with shelter during the Holocaust are few in number, but their acts do allow us to hope for a future in which self-preservation will not come at the expense of moral duty.

Under the title 'Social Manipulation of Morality: Moralizing Actors - Adiaphorizing Action', Bauman states that the 'bitter wisdom' that he tried to incorporate in the book is that 'the cruellest thing about cruelty is that it dehumanizes its victims before it destroys them. And the hardest of struggles is to remain human in inhuman conditions.'⁽⁴⁷⁾ He agrees with Max Scheler that morals exist and have a presence before any form of education and that morals are not the product of society but of

45 Ibid., p. 205.

46 Ibid., p. 206.

47 Ibid., p. 209.



human feeling, which are the essence of all moral behaviours and the foundation of life in society. I also agree with this: it is impossible for us to behave morally if we erase the distinction between good and evil and consider the moral to be whatever society and its legislative authority produce, whether in the form of customs, traditions or laws.

Bauman criticizes the attempt of the Jewish State to monopolise the role of the victim and its claims to be the inheritor of the Holocaust and thus the sole legitimate beneficiary. He considers this to 'preven[t] the experience it narrates as 'uniquely Jewish' from turning into a universal problem of the modern human condition and thus into public property.'⁽⁴⁸⁾ The corollary to this is the marginalization of the Holocaust globally, the idea that it is a part of *German* history, culture and philosophy, their 'bafflingly authoritarian national character'.

Bauman stakes his hopes – or so it seems from his liking for postmodernist philosophy – on the collapse of grand narratives (what he refers to as the lost paradise) and the non-emergence of other metanarratives that might justify genocides as Nazism and Communism did; the world of postmodernity has liberated itself of 'the white man's burden', 'the proletariat' and 'the Aryan race', all narratives that justified genocide. But events, to my mind, do not bear this out. Neither did modernity comprise only these narratives – it also encompassed narratives about human rights, world peace, the relativity of national sovereignty, and learning from the Nazi experience. The collapse of these narratives has not been exclusively positive, either, and may lead to a surge of barbarity or civil war as occurred in Rwanda and Bosnia, or in Syria where the Regime has carried out what might be called a genocide against broad swathes of the population who rebelled against it, or indeed in Myanmar to the Rohingya. All this took place in the absence of grand narratives, in the absence of any state impulse to send a message out to humanity. The Putinism dominant in today's Russia is an expression of the collapse of these grand narratives, since it proceeds only from the premise of the state's geostrategic interests, holding only national sovereignty sacred and broadcasting no message to the world; it has nothing *to* broadcast except its desire to preserve Russia's interests. The same sickness has infected the USA under Donald Trump. Popularisms all over Europe begin from the premise of 'national interests' against the liberal narrative – and even the narrative of shared European civilization on which the European Union is built.

Bauman concludes with an issue that is to inspire many of his later works: that modernity is based on combating fear and anxiety and warding off the danger that existed to both nature and society, through the state and its systems and through modern science. In his view modern life can be traced back to the society of risks, a society used to living with danger and an understanding that life is full of dangers that cannot be avoided, and that people in modern society live without knowing what the future will bring. Modernity began by exchanging much of the freedom previously enjoyed by individuals for total social security. But today, many of the social guarantees of individual security have been withdrawn: the state has abandoned many of its responsibilities, life has become unsafe and painful, and the promises to simplify a complex world have been broken. Individuals have

48 Ibid., p. 211.

become self-centred, and their concerns limited to personal security and the safety of the body and its extensions – private property, the home, the street, the neighbourhood, the immediate environment, and the combating of crime and fear of strangers.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Bauman preferred the term 'liquid modernity' to 'postmodernity'. This book could well be seen as the first in the *Liquid Modernity* series. Heba Raouf Ezzat summarises what Bauman means by this term in her introduction to *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* as 'the dissolution of bonds: the separation of the ruling authority from effective control of politics, now determined by balances outside the borders of the state; the struggle of individual suffering after the fragmentation of social bonds and the horizontal trajectories of social and professional life from stage to stage without any vertical accumulation taking place as a result of this rapidly-changing situation.'⁽⁵⁰⁾

Like Leotard, who considered postmodernity part of modernity, Bauman defines postmodernity as 'the modern mind taking a long, attentive and sober look at itself,' a modernity aware of its own limits and delusions, such as the idea that knowledge is always progressive, comprehensive, universal and rational.⁽⁵¹⁾ This self-conscious modernity also knows that things that consider themselves universal are typically borrowed from the local and the partial, even from local culture; that what were once considered settled questions no longer are, that what was considered certain and clear is actually ambiguous and vague.

If postmodernity is a time of danger and uncertainty for Bauman then it is also a time of opportunities – opportunities that depend on recognising moral responsibility, which is the precondition of any true emancipation in postmodernity. It all depends on successfully introducing the moral element into social life, so that there is a role for moral standards produced by responsibility and the individual conscience. This begins with a recognition that uncertainty and confusion in the face of the vagaries of this era and the insecurity inherent therein must not alarm us, and that we cannot wait for modernity to find a rational solution to these problems. Rather, we must coexist with them, and consider them an opportunity for moral choices not based on rational calculations.

49 Ibid., p. 238.

50 Zygmunt Bauman, *al-Azmina as-Sa'ila al-'Ish fi Zaman al-Layaqin*, tr. Hijaj Abu Jabr, intr. Heba Raouf Ezzat (al-Maktaba al-'Arabiyya li'l-Abhath wa'n-Nashr, 2017), p. 13.

51 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) p. 273.