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Genocide as Social Practice

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The Problem of Explaining the Causes of the Nazi Genocides

Comparative analysis does not exempt scholars from trying to understand the causes of the Nazi genocides and the conditions that made them possible. On the contrary, without such an understanding, they would find it impossible to establish the structural similarities and differences between these and other genocidal processes—or to know whether two events were comparable at all.

This chapter examines some of the many social science perspectives that provide causal models for understanding the Nazi genocide. However, this examination is simply a “contribution” (as Ian Kershaw would say) to understanding a phenomenon of almost unimaginable scope and complexity.

I would be pleased if this critical survey—together with the hypotheses suggested in the next chapter—sheds light on some of the lesser known aspects of the Nazi genocide and encourages others to explore them in new ways. However, this is just one approach to understanding Nazism—one that by no means exhausts this complex subject.

Partly as a result of my own theoretical affinity with the pioneering work of Raul Hilberg and Hannah Arendt, and partly because of the relevance of their work to the issues under discussion, these two authors take up a large part of this chapter. Like Hilberg and Arendt, I view the Nazi genocides as a social practice linked to the logic of modernity and its scientific, political, and bureaucratic development. This approach does not exclude ideas from other relevant perspectives that might be useful for carrying out further analysis.

Finally, before we embark on this chapter, it is worth pointing out that it is in no way intended to be a survey of the thousands of important works on the Nazi genocides. Its purpose is simply to identify clearly and draw together the main theoretical threads running through this book.

Hilberg, Arendt, and the Question of the Irrationality of Evil and the German *Sonderweg*

The explanation of the so-called *Sonderweg* (special path) as a view of German history was widely accepted by historians in the first two decades after the Second World War, at least outside of Germany.¹ Works in this line of research attempted to explain how it was possible that, in the heart of an enlightened Europe, in a country that prided itself on being the cradle of modern philosophy, a phenomenon of this kind was able to develop.

In the 1960s, however, two authors challenged the prevailing consensus. It is true that several members of the Frankfurt School—Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Franz Neumann, and Walter Benjamin—had already hinted strongly at a possible connection between Nazism and modernity. However, in 1961, Raul Hilberg published a book that was to become canonical over the next twenty years.² In *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Hilberg discusses the role played by bureaucracy in the process of annihilating European Jewish communities. A monumental achievement for its time, its publication was followed almost simultaneously by the appearance of Hannah Arendt's notes on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi lieutenant colonel responsible for transporting millions of Jews to concentration camps. In her book, entitled provocatively *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt describes the perpetrators as "terribly and terrifyingly normal" and, more importantly, argues that genocide is latent in all "normal" Western civilized societies.³

Adorno had already suggested in *The Authoritarian Personality* that individual personality traits and collective psychic structures found among Nazis were equally common in a society like the United States.⁴ But the work of Hilberg and Arendt marked a turning point in our way of thinking about the relationship between Nazism and modernity.

The commonsense understanding of the time, even among legal experts, was that Nazism had been an exceptional departure from the upward path of human progress, but that it did not, in itself, invalidate the notion of indefinite progress. But Hilberg and Arendt pointed out that genocide—or at least the potential for genocide—was the rule rather than the exception in the contemporary world. Far from being signs of progress, such features of modern life as bureaucratization, task division, routines, and depersonalization were essential, although not sufficient, for the mass extermination of populations.

Significantly, neither work was well received when it first appeared. Arendt's essentially journalistic work came in for severe criticism in academic and political circles because she portrayed Nazi perpetrators as ordinary human beings, thus challenging the image of insane and irrational Nazis, far removed from our everyday world. Dozens of works were published attempting to discredit the views and interpretations of Arendt on Eichmann and the

perpetrators, and her work was banished from “serious” reading lists on Nazism in Israel and the United States, and even in France.⁵

It was another thirty years before a historian, Christopher Browning, was able to develop a similar line of argument in *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. Browning’s book, which traces the history of a battalion of German Order Police operating in Poland during the German occupation, marks a fundamental turning point in the way we view the Nazis. Browning found that this group of 500 men in their thirties and forties had started out as just that—ordinary men.⁶ Only a few of them were members of the Nazi Party and fewer still belonged to the SS. And yet they went on to shoot (or transport to Treblinka death camp) at least 83,000 Jewish civilians.

By the 1950s, self-exculpatory accounts of the Nazi era had become the norm in Western society. These constructed Nazism as an exclusively German pathology, completely at odds with the recent history of the West. This model was challenged by Hilberg, Arendt, and Adorno, who placed Nazism within the mainstream of Western societies as a potential that exists in every one of them. This also raised thorny questions about the degree of commitment, complicity, empathy, or indifference of many governments and much of civil society in the Europe of the 1930s and 1940s.

If Arendt was placed on academia’s index of banned books about the Shoah, Hilberg proved even harder for most intellectuals to swallow and was largely ignored. For the generation that had lived through the Nazi era, the demonization of Germany and a collective memory of irrationality functioned as a survival mechanism, making self-exculpation possible together with a sort of closure. It was only the next generation that was able to question the contradiction inherent in such an approach—the fact that millions could have taken part in an irrational event and yet nobody was willing to discuss the extent to which *they themselves* had participated in it. Once people were aware of the inconsistency, they were able to read Hilberg’s book with fresh eyes.

People in postwar Europe were able to lay their ghosts to rest by claiming that the Nazis were irrational, but their children could not help noticing this contradiction again and again. There is no other way that we can understand works such as those of Ernst Nolte, whose success was built on the inadequacy of conventional explanations of the Nazi genocide.⁷

Hilberg, Arendt, and Adorno are, then, the forerunners of a debate that only began to come to the forefront in the 1980s, when a new generation of scholars was growing more and more dissatisfied with established causal explanations of Nazism. Zygmunt Bauman, Christopher Browning, and Enzo Traverso, among others, attempted to give a deeper answer to the question of why Nazism happened by mapping its European genealogy and its place in the formation of modern nation-states.⁸

Bauman's controversial *Modernity and the Holocaust* was a first attempt to describe systematically the modern nature of the Nazi genocide and its founding and formative role in shaping the modern world.⁹ Consequently, Bauman's book was criticized and minimized when it first appeared in 1989, although less so than Arendt's work a quarter of a century earlier. Traverso's *The Origins of Nazi Violence*,¹⁰ coming over a decade after *Modernity and the Holocaust*, placed Nazism on a time continuum that began with colonial genocide. In the words of Traverso, "The Germans did nothing but apply in Poland, the Ukraine, the Baltic countries, and in Russia the same principles and methods that France and the United Kingdom had already adopted in Africa and Asia."¹¹

Compared with what Arendt, Adorno, or even Bauman had suggested, Traverso's proposals smacked of demystification and even heresy. Traverso had brought Nazism in from the cold, so to speak, turning it from a story of anti-Semitism writ large into a decisive event in world history. Nazism could now be seen as a key element (although just one) in a way of constructing identity and otherness that began with the inquisitorial activities of the Catholic Church in the seventeenth century and the development of the nation-state (first along confessional lines and later along nonconfessional ones).

Obviously, techniques for objectifying and dehumanizing people (which, of course, are directly connected to genocide) could not be the same in Europe as in Europe's colonies. This discrepancy is one of the many keys to interpreting the uniqueness of Nazism, its lines of cleavage with respect to other European racist thinking, and its genocidal consequences. But cleavage does not imply a complete break. If Nazi racism had its origins in Europe, we need to ask which mainstream European logics of power it is related to. This is a core question for understanding how and why Nazism mutated into genocide. This perspective was later developed in a whole line of analysis that connects genocide and colonialism, as it does in works by Dirk Moses, Donald Bloxham, Dominik Schaller, and Juergen Zimmerer, among others.

The Concept of Totalitarianism

In the past, most scholars who asked about the causes of the Nazi genocides were influenced by the emergence and subsequent evolution of the concept of totalitarianism. Although this term was regularly used in Mussolini's Italy during the 1930s, first by fascists and then by their opponents, it was Hannah Arendt who popularized it in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,¹² even if later usage owes little to her analysis. Hannah Arendt's concept thus pre-dates Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) by at least a decade.

Although some of Arendt's analyses are interesting, the concept of totalitarianism in the hands of authors like Carl Friedrich, Dwight MacDonald, Arthur Koestler, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, among others, has become—to

paraphrase Slavoj Žižek¹³—an “ideological antioxidant” covering up the connections between genocidal social practices and modern Western civilization. In tracing the history of the concept of totalitarianism, Traverso proposes a periodization beginning with Mussolini’s fascists describing themselves as totalitarian and then their identification of fascism and bolshevism as the only “real” forms of politics.

As Traverso shows, the concept of totalitarianism was established in the English language shortly afterward by antifascist European exiles living in America. However, it only acquired real significance—and, at the same time, became a conceptual trap—during the Cold War, when it was used to equate Nazism and Stalinism, thus rescuing and glorifying “anti-totalitarian” liberal democracy.¹⁴ It is interesting to note how comparisons between Stalinism and Nazism were used to support this liberal perspective as well as to underpin Ernst Nolte’s Holocaust revisionism.

Žižek’s irony about ideological antioxidants helps us to understand how the concept of totalitarianism produces a logical disconnection between the modern Western world and genocidal social practices. These practices began in the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth as first the British and the French and later the Italians and the Germans attempted to legitimize European colonialism and the domination and extermination of indigenous populations. In the cases of Germany and Italy, these included Germany’s war of extermination against the Hereros in Southwest Africa between 1904 and 1908 and Italy’s colonial war in Ethiopia in the 1930s. An intermediate point of cleavage between colonial and constituent genocides can be found in the Armenian genocide as a step toward creating a modern pan-Turkish nation-state out of the scattered territories of the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1918.

Franz Borkenau, writing at the outbreak of the Second World War, was one of the few theorists to use the concept of totalitarianism in a different sense. He tried to understand totalitarianism “not as a German aberration or as an expression of Slav barbarism, but as the authentic fruit of modernity.”¹⁵

If the concept of totalitarianism is too limited to account for historical processes, Žižek undermines it still further by noting how it dissolves the structural relationship between Nazism and modernity—or even between Nazism and capitalism. The concept of totalitarianism hijacked that of democracy in ways that had little to do with the history of “democratic” European states (first England and France, and later Italy and Germany). It portrayed the Europe that rises in the Rhine or Loire and ends at the Pyrenees as the “cradle” of modern, Western, democratic civilization, pitted against a wild world of totalitarian barbarism, which tended to be progressively more Eastern and Slavic and less Germanic. Paradoxically, a racist model thus emerged as a “counterbalance” to the ideology of racism, with the peculiarity that it was defended by liberal democrats (such as Carl Friedrich, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Karl-Dietrich

Bracher) and social democrats (drawing on the work of ex-communists such as Arthur Koestler and George Orwell).¹⁶

And so Europe fell into its own trap. The United States—as the stronghold of Western democracy and leader of the free world—then claimed the right to judge and evaluate the “reformed” European states (and, increasingly, the whole planet) on their “level of democracy,” their “freedom,” and their “respect for human rights.” Indeed, the success of the concept of totalitarianism as a form of symbolic representation of the Nazi genocide has not been sufficiently appreciated.

The United States carried out more repressive, racist, and xenophobic military interventions than any other country on the planet during the second half of the twentieth century. These ranged from the Bay of Pigs invasion and Vietnam, through Guatemala, Grenada, and Panama, to the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. And yet the United States was able to present itself as a bastion of democracy and pluralism. This image can only be understood as part of a successful symbolic reworking of the Nazi genocide in which earlier processes of derationalization, demonization, and a resort to the metaphysical construct of evil helped to produce the opposite pole of “health” and “normality” in modern, liberal, Western civilization.

Thus, the concept of totalitarianism has been more successful than even Žižek recognizes. It has become the key notion for recycling the Nazis’ racialization of politics, turning their technology of power into a kind of antifascist “racialization of politics.” In this way, antitotalitarian thinking can be seen as a new synthesis. It is no longer the fascist blend of anti-Marxist left and “revolutionary” right; rather, it is a fusion between an anti-Marxist left and a right whose populism has dissolved and been transformed into a “revolution from above” in the name of world civilization and the fight against totalitarianism.

The concept of totalitarianism is the best example of how social processes eventually develop into symbolic representations. Hegemonic discourses give meaning to experience so that it can be understood and fixed in one form or another. However, the military defeat of Nazism—with the millions of deaths on the Eastern Front and the emergence of local, antifascist resistance movements throughout Europe, from Italy and France to Yugoslavia and Greece—did not triumph at the symbolic level. After the fall of Nazism, the notion of totalitarianism became a symbolic wall stronger than the Berlin Wall itself in preventing a return to the principle of the self-determination of peoples.

In the words of Žižek, and paraphrasing the advertising slogan of Celestial Seasonings Green Tea, the “beneficial role” of totalitarianism as an “antioxidant” has been to “inhibit the free radicals and help the social body to maintain good political-ideological health.”

Marxism in the Face of Genocidal Social Practices

If the liberal right was able to reinvent itself as an enemy of fascism through the concept of totalitarianism, Marxism sadly minimized and trivialized the specific nature of the Nazi genocide. Apart from a few fleeting insights by Leon Trotsky and Antonio Gramsci and a later reworking of fascism by Ernest Mandel, many Marxists tended to subsume Nazism under the category of fascism, defined by Georgi Dimitroff at the Seventh Comintern Congress in 1935 as the “open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic, and most imperialist elements of finance capital.”¹⁷

Examining what various fascist regimes had had in common—which was much more than the so-called totalitarian regimes—did not help Marxist thinkers to distinguish the Nazis’ radically new genocidal policy from the brutality of fascist regimes, or to comprehend the differences between mass movements in Italy and Germany and repressive military governments in Spain and Portugal and, later, in Latin America.

For Trotsky, on the contrary, the Nazi genocides cast doubt on the classical Marxist position that the political idiosyncrasies of different modern nation-states were irrelevant. Although Trotsky still saw Nazism in the early 1930s as a “feudal ideological residue exhumed by a declining capitalist society,” by the late 1930s the fate of Jews under the Nazis seemed increasingly to confirm the alternatives posed by Rosa Luxemburg at the beginning of the twentieth century—socialism or barbarism. “Today decaying capitalist society is striving to squeeze the Jewish people from all its pores; seventeen million individuals out of the two billion populating the globe, that is, less than 1 percent, can no longer find a place on our planet! Amid the vast expanses of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison.”¹⁸ Despite these insights, Marxism tended to view Nazism as an exceptional and archaic form of barbarism—a vision similar to that described earlier, which demonized Nazism as an atavistic regression running counter to the development of the modern world. Ernest Mandel was one of the few Marxists able to build on the insights of Trotsky. In a highly suggestive work on the meaning of the Second World War, Mandel noted that “the roots of genocide are not to be found in traditional petit bourgeois and peasant Judeophobia, but rather in the racist and colonialist culture of imperialism, whose murderous nature has already been made clear by the slave trade and the extermination of indigenous populations in Central and South America by the Conquistadores. The historical roots of Auschwitz must therefore be discovered in Western civilization, its culture and its social relations.”¹⁹

For fifty years Trotsky’s insights were ignored by a hegemonic Marxism which, servile to the geopolitical needs of the Soviet Union, subscribed to the

“demonizing” visions of the Nazi genocide.²⁰ It was not until 1994, three years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that Traverso used these strands in his book *The Marxists and the Jewish Question* to develop the European genealogy of Nazi violence as an offshoot of imperialism and colonialism.

The shortcomings of Marxism as a theoretical framework for explaining genocidal social practices shows what happens when theory is subordinated to geopolitical interests and how, in turn, theoretical dogmatism becomes an obstacle to political struggle. Although large numbers of Marxists were killed or persecuted by the Nazis, Marxism had problems in thinking critically about genocidal practices until the 1980s, when the rediscovery of Antonio Gramsci and Walter Benjamin, among some other classic heretics, together with the breakup of the Soviet Union, allowed the emergence of new Marxist writers (such as Arno Mayer, Enzo Traverso, and Tony Barta, among others), who tried to approach the issue of genocidal social practices from this perspective, an endeavor that has only just begun.

Michel Foucault and the Concept of “Society of Normalization”

Here I will take an unorthodox look at some of the ideas of Michel Foucault, paying special attention to the symbolic dimension of social practices. I will consider above all his analysis of what he identifies as a new form of social relations, a new technology of power generated by the rise of capitalism, which he incisively calls the “the normalizing society.”

According to Foucault, “the normalizing society” has two complementary facets: the disciplinary and the statistical. *Disciplinary norms* help to build average, productive bodies capable of ensuring the average performance required by industry—in other words, cogs for the industrial machine. *Statistical norms*, on the other hand, help to build healthy bodies by defining average life expectancies, average strengths, and norms of hygiene that guarantee productivity. Statistical norms regulate human life: they are used to control fertility (through birth control) and mortality (by providing care), to detect epidemics, and to construct urban health networks. They give governments the power to lengthen and enhance citizens’ lives.²¹

Within the normalizing society, the “majority” no longer has the derogatory overtones of the “mass” as it did in the feudal technology of power. Instead, it has become synonymous with “normalized subjects” belonging to the complementary categories of population and citizens. In contrast, the concept of “minority” has become associated with segments of the population that cannot be “normalized”: the disabled, the sick, the insane, thieves, idlers, groups that—for economic, political, or cultural reasons—do not fit with the concepts of nation, citizenship, and property. These concepts of the “normal” together with

the binary pair “normal-pathological” and the concept of “degeneration” allow us to build the image of the “nonstandard Other” as a danger to the population.

Thanks to the demystification of Nazism by Hilberg, Arendt, and Adorno, the concept of the “normalizing society” makes it easy to understand how genocide became a constituent practice of modernity. The origins of modern genocide can be traced back to the challenge posed to the egalitarian contractualism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by a new order of values based on inequality. The idea that not all human beings are equal leads to the need to make those who are different “disappear”—either by forcing them to conform to the norm or, if this is not possible, by murdering them.

The concept of the normalizing society inevitably leads us to consider how the various continuums of normality/abnormality are constructed. To understand this important and complex question, I will refer now to the debate between Arno Mayer and Christopher Browning, to which I will add Zygmunt Bauman’s reflections on the subject as well as some ideas of my own.

From Christopher Browning’s “Racialism” to Arno Mayer’s “Politicalism”: Jewish or Jewish-Bolshevik?

As mentioned earlier, Nazism was demonized by most historians during the two decades following World War II. However, as this vision gradually lost ground, historians polarized into two camps, which Tim Mason has aptly called the intentionalists and the functionalists.²² The intentionalists focused on the intentions of the Nazi leaders, especially those of Hitler himself, in bringing about genocide, seen as the result of a master plan. In contrast, the functionalists were much more cautious, considering genocide as a latent possibility inherent in Nazism. In this view, genocide was not the inevitable result of the Nazis’ ascent to power in 1933 because it existed at that time only as a *potentiality*. Rather, genocide emerged from the structural features of Nazism—in other words, from its subsequent political, economic, and social development. Although functionalists may emphasize different contributing factors—the war, the Nazis’ political ups and downs, their lack of success on the Eastern Front, and the failure of their resettlement plans—all agree that the destruction of the Jewish people did not become inevitable until 1942.

At this point, I especially wish to highlight a debate involving two of the many historians who have decided to tackle the problem of “causal explanation” directly from a functionalist perspective. Here, I am more interested in the way these historians weave the facts into complex and comprehensive models for historical understanding than in determining the precise moment that the decision was taken to implement the “Final Solution,” which was the focus of

their debate. Of course, several other authors have set out to achieve similar goals, but the Mayer-Browning debate will help to clarify some issues that are crucial to my own hypotheses.

The first author I will examine is the Princeton researcher Arno Mayer. In his essay *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken? The "Final Solution" in History*, Mayer sees the Nazi genocide as part of the Nazis' counterrevolutionary war against Judeo-Bolshevism. Mayer thus seeks to reinstate the Nazis in world history by placing them at the center of a class struggle that erupted in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century.²³

The second author I will comment on is the researcher Christopher Browning. Especially in *The Path to Genocide*, Browning explicitly challenges Mayer's hypothesis by prioritizing Hitler's racist discourse and his proposed reorganization of Europe along racial lines. Refreshingly, Browning does this without attempting to demonize or pathologize the Nazi leadership. Instead, he analyzes the racist proposal for redesigning Europe and its consequences at the level of social relations.²⁴

As a foil to this discussion, I will also consider the work of Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who draws equally on Karl Marx and Max Weber in attempting to understand the place occupied by the Jews in interwar Europe and why they were the special target of Nazi annihilation, linked not only to the issue of class struggle or racist policies, but the more global and complex problem of how identity is constructed in the modern Western world.²⁵

Arno Mayer's Vision

Explicitly eschewing the intentionalist approach, Mayer places the Nazis in a historical sequence that combines the concepts of "ideological crusade" and "total war." He traces the idea of an ideological crusade back to the European Christian crusades against Jews and Muslims between 1095 and 1270, highlighting the crusaders' role as "liberators" and their overobjectification of the Other. Similarly, Mayer traces the term "total war" to the Thirty Years' War between European Catholics and Protestants from 1618 to 1648.

In Mayer's view, the Nazi genocide was a combination of a *total war* (which he placed between 1914 and 1945—in other words, another thirty years' war beginning and ending with the two world wars) and an *ideological crusade*, this time against those who subverted the modern order (not in religious but in ideological terms). This was the crusade against communism by the capitalist West. Nazism, from this point of view, represents the heyday of counterrevolution in Europe, waging a war of annihilation only in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, quite unlike its conventional military campaigns in Western Europe.

Mayer argues in his book that conventional approaches to the Judeocide have obscured some very important evidence, such as the order given to the *Einsatzgruppen*—mobile killing units, as distinct from regular army units—by Reinhardt Heydrich during the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 (Operation Barbarossa) to eliminate “all high-ranking members of the Communist party, all ‘people’s commissars,’ all Jews in service to the party.” This policy had its direct antecedent in the Nazi persecution of German political dissidents and their internment in concentration camps between 1933 and 1935. Mayer examines the image of the “Judeo-Bolshevik” constructed by Nazi propaganda in order to understand Nazi genocidal social practices and the role played by the concentration camps in Germany, where communist opposition was repressed *before* the anti-Semitic campaign began.

It was this anticommunist ideological crusade that won the Nazis the support of the German elites and the silence of the European elites until the invasion of Poland in September 1939 led to war with Britain and France. Until that moment, they had allowed Nazism to grow and consolidate in order to keep communism in check. The Nazi battles with the West were part of the struggle for political hegemony but, Mayer insists, not a war of annihilation.

But why, then, the obsession with Western Jews and not just with Judeo-Bolsheviks? Why is a racial rather than a political metaphor used to justify the war of annihilation? Mayer sees the racist thinking of Hitler, Goebbels, and other Nazi leaders as “irrational” even if it also served the interests of Nazism. We should not forget that in the premodern period both the ideological crusade and total war had religious components, which the Nazis revived in the figure of the Jew—but this does not go far toward explaining the Nazi genocide as such.

For Mayer, the Nazis constructed a syncretic ideology with a confusing overlap of antimodernism, anticommunism, and racism. This syncretism is synthesized in the figure of the Jew. However, this does not explain the phenomenon itself—only its symptoms, its ideological expression. Mayer argues that from a Nazi perspective even conservative Jews are seen as “Judeo-Bolsheviks.”

Finally, Mayer argues that the Nazis decided to annihilate European Jewry only after failing to eradicate the ideological politics of communism and Judeo-Bolshevism during the invasion of the Soviet Union. Mayer tries to demonstrate that decisions about the total annihilation of the Jews were taken when the results of Operation Barbarossa started to become uncertain or directly adverse, “since we cannot annihilate the Bolshevik enemy, let us at least annihilate its Jewish face.”

Provocative and heretical, Mayer’s essay has the merit of placing the Nazi genocide within a historical sequence, restoring its place—where it is perhaps not alone—within world history and not on its edges.

Christopher Browning's Vision

As mentioned earlier, Browning explicitly challenges Arno Mayer—and in fact one of the chapters of his book is an open response to Mayer's essay. For Browning, Mayer's chief mistake is to locate the Jewish genocide (which Mayer calls "Judeocide") as a "by-product" of the Nazis' anticommunist ideological crusade. That is, Browning's main problem with Mayer is that the latter's general framework for explaining the Nazi genocide makes no allowance for the distinctiveness of this Judeocide. Was Hitler's madness to blame? Or was it just a secondary cause? Was it a symptom? Can it be explained simply as a hate reaction once it was clear that the invasion of the Soviet Union and its mission to destroy communism had failed?

In Browning's view, Mayer denies the distinctiveness of Judeocide by transforming it into a spin-off of a higher-order set of practices described within a more general explanatory framework. Thus, Mayer ignores the central innovation in the Nazis' technology of power, which is their racist worldview.

The attempt at European reorganization along racial lines is seen by Browning, unlike Mayer, not as the crazy project of a few deluded leaders supported by a self-interested European (as well as German) bourgeoisie but as a viable political project and the basis of Nazi politics and even Nazi geopolitics. The annexation of territories to the east of Germany to create *Lebensraum* ("living space") for the Reich can only be explained from this logic, and not as a derivative of the Nazis' ideological crusade against communism. Browning does not deny such a crusade existed, but he argues that the Nazis' political project was separate from the wishes and priorities of the European bourgeoisie. The Nazis aimed to progressively resettle and partition populations in the East, according to their degree of "racial impurity," Aryans being the purest, then Slavs, and finally Jews. "Inferior races" would be relocated in Asia (although in 1940 Himmler seriously contemplated sending the Jews to the island of Madagascar), leaving *Lebensraum* in Europe for the development of the "superior races."

It was the failure of this geopolitical project and measures taken to resettle Jews on a Jewish reservation in the Lublin district of Poland between late 1939 and mid-1940 which led to the Final Solution. If there was nowhere left in the world for them to live, then the solution was to remove them from this world to a "nonplace" by transforming them from "subhumans" (*Untermenschen*) into "nonhumans" (*Unmenschen*).

For Mayer, Nazi ideology uses the figure of the Jew in its struggle against communism. For Browning, however, Hitler only hated what he saw as the "Jewish characteristics" of communism—its emancipatory, egalitarian, and internationalist side. Hitler's struggle against communism was intended to forge strategic partnerships with the European bourgeoisie. His long-term plans, however, were more linked to a racial reorganization of Europe rather

than an ideological one. In Browning's view, the Nazis believed that ideology was underpinned by race and not the other way round.

If Mayer sees Nazi racism as a tool, Browning sees it as an end in itself and the main focus of Nazi policies. Ultimately, we cannot choose between these two explanations unless we know to what extent Nazism believed its own myths, and to what extent observables account for social processes. Browning takes Nazi anti-Semitism much more seriously and relocates it at the very center of their *Weltanschauung*. Even though the Nazis came to power in an anticommunist struggle supported by the German elites, their ultimate goal was not to fight communism but to redesign Europe along racist lines. This explains their obsession with hunting down all Jews wherever they were—whether in eastern, western, northern, or southern Europe.

Could Zygmunt Bauman Add Something to This Debate?

Commendably, Bauman has developed a perspective that explains the processes by which power was consolidated in Europe while, at the same time, accounting for the specific nature of the "Judeocide." In his work he rethinks the role of the Jews in twentieth-century Europe both in relation to the ideological struggle between capitalism and communism and from the wider perspective of "biopolitics" (in the Foucauldian sense of the word). He does this by focusing on the reality of Jewish life during this period: the role of Jews in the new model of identity formation of nation-states of modern Europe. Bauman builds a metaphor to explain this place that is a nonplace, a people lying astride of modernity.

In a model of power that defines identity in national terms, excluding all other features, what place remains for a people spread across the length and breadth of Europe without a state of their own? In the era of nation-states, the Jews were a stateless nation that, unlike other peoples, claimed to be members of various European nation-states without giving up their identity or sense of cultural belonging. This was a characteristic the Jews shared with another major cultural victim of Nazism: the Gypsies (i.e., the Sinti and Roma peoples).

Here I wish to add my own ideas to the model proposed by Bauman, and also comment on the Mayer-Browning debate, including the role of the Jews and the Gypsies as the main victims of the Nazi extermination camps. Under any regime seeking to reduce ethnic, religious, cultural, or ideological diversity in order to create a unified nation, those seen as having "divided loyalties" will immediately be accused of subversion.²⁶ Not only the Nazis but indeed the whole of the European bourgeoisie strongly rejected the Jews' internationalism, their emancipatory traditions, and their ethical egalitarianism, as well as balking at the Roma people's notions of cultural autonomy and communal property.

In July 1938, just eleven days after Hitler annexed Austria, U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt convened an international conference at Évian-les-Bains, France, to discuss the growing number of Jewish refugees fleeing from Nazi persecution. Representatives from thirty-two countries and twenty-four voluntary organizations attended, but when the United States and Britain refused to take important numbers of Jews, most of the other countries followed suit, leaving around half a million Jews trapped in Germany alone.

It is difficult to explain the refusal of the various governments to welcome Jewish refugees simply in terms of “indifference” to their fate. The truth is that no modern nation-state wanted Central European Jews because of their subversive potential (their internationalism and wandering, their conscious or unconscious challenges to the identities of the modern world based on exclusion). In the words of Hitler: “We’re doing what all of Europe wants to do, but would never dare to admit to it.”

However, by glossing over this issue, later representations of Nazism proved useful to both Europe’s leaders and many members of Jewish communities living in Europe. Europe’s politicians could wash their hands of the Holocaust, putting all the blame on Nazi Germany, while Europe’s surviving Jewish communities could try to forget the modern anti-Semitic stigma—particularly after 1948, when the Jewish people were “normalized” by having their own state, the State of Israel—created by and for the Jewish nation.

How do we explain the silence of the European leaders before the war or the absence of bombing raids to destroy the Nazi death camps and railways leading to them once the war had begun? Was it necessary for Europe’s leaders to stir up ancient and lethal hatreds again, a victimizing paranoia that always sees the Other as an enemy? How, also, do we explain the persistence of anti-Gypsy laws in much of Europe after the Second World War? Or the reappearance of hate and discrimination against the Roma in twenty-first-century France, Spain, and Italy?

In this sense, the figure of the Jew—and also that of the Gypsy—was quintessentially opposed to the ways identity was constructed in the modern Western world. It was not the bolshevism of certain Jewish workers and intellectuals or the physical appearance of Central European Jews and Gypsies that disturbed the Nazis, but their universalism, their multiple identities, and their diasporic wandering. This is how, with the help of various historical circumstances, Jews and Gypsies became prototypical figures of discrimination and persecution.

It was the social ubiquity of European Jews that made them such easy targets everywhere (not just in one place) for the ideological crusade described by Mayer. The Jews were not a social class: they were to be found among the European bourgeoisie (as an assimilated minority that was discriminated against, but present nonetheless) as well as among the middle and working classes. This made it relatively simple for the Nazis to stir up various class hatreds.

Tony Barta and the Concept of “Relations of Genocide”: Social Relationship or Social Practice?

In 1987, the Australian researcher Tony Barta—whose specialty is not Nazism but the annihilation of indigenous peoples in Australia—developed a new Marxist approach to the phenomenon of genocide by creating the concept of “relations of genocide.”²⁷

Based on a novel interpretation of the Marxist concept of “relations of production,” Barta explores how they can become “relations of destruction” and, in particular, the specific type of destruction involving genocide. For Barta, the common sense and way of life of the Australian settler population were based on the disappearance and destruction of the colonized population (either directly through murder or indirectly through the destruction of their livelihood).

Barta suggests that the Australian settlers’ behavior was not a random phenomenon. Rather, destructiveness was a central element in the relationship between modern Western colonialism and Otherness. In other words, when capitalism reached its colonial phase (what Lenin called its “imperialist phase”), production and economic growth could only be maintained through “genocidal relations” with the colonized populations. Thus, capitalism condemned the colonized to material and symbolic extinction by destroying their way of life, treating and thinking about them like objects, ignoring them, or rendering them invisible.

Even today, portraying genocide as a “social relationship” is a highly subversive approach given the prevailing hegemonic view in the field of genocide studies. It raises far-reaching questions about the way Western modernity has organized the planet and relations between its inhabitants.

Although Barta raises searching questions about the consequences—both past and present—of colonialism, his approach is less useful for analyzing domestic or reorganizing genocides, which form the subject of this book. Nevertheless—even if Barta is unaware of it, accepting the notion of genocide as a “social relationship” may somehow lead us to “naturalize” this social relationship as a stage in a historical sequence that is difficult (if not impossible) to reverse.

Revisiting some of the ideas developed in chapter I, I will now explain the difference between genocide as a “social relationship” and genocide as a “social practice,” that is, as a specific way of destroying and rebuilding social relationships. It is clear that destruction itself is not in itself a *relationship* but a *practice* that destroys certain social relations—for instance, cooperation, solidarity, reciprocity, and autonomy—and makes other ways of relating hegemonic, for example, subordination, betrayal, individualism, and authenticity. Unlike Barta, I am arguing that genocide is the cause (and not the effect) of a profound transformation in social relations.

Toward a Provisional Synthesis

In this chapter we have examined various suggestions to the effect that the Nazi genocides form an integral part of European history and, therefore, of world history. The topics we have discussed include the connections between genocide and modernity suggested by Hilberg, Adorno, and Arendt; the different views regarding totalitarianism; attempts by Gramsci and Mandel to place Nazism within the Marxist model of understanding social reality; the genealogy established by Traverso tracing the Nazi genocides back to colonial annihilation processes; the debate between Mayer and Browning about the “meaning” of the annihilation of the Jewish population in Central Europe; Bauman’s perspective on the role of the Jew in the modern West—with my own contributions to this debate; and the concept of genocidal relations, as developed by Tony Barta.

Was Nazism a latent potential in or an inevitable consequence of modernity? Was it an expression of class struggle? A peculiar mode of social relationship in the imperialist phase of capitalism? A projection onto European soil of the dominant modes of constructing Otherness in Europe’s colonies? A counter ideological crusade in the context of a total war? A racist redesigning of Europe’s geopolitical map? Or was it a dispute over how to construct identity and Otherness in Western modernity?

I do not claim to be the final arbiter between these competing visions and debates. Nevertheless, together they suggest ways of thinking about historical phenomena. For example, can we understand the genocides of the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America as a continuation of the Nazis’ ideological crusade against communism? One only has to remember calls during this period from the Argentine and Chilean military for a “Third World War” or the Catholic Church’s involvement as a central player in the “crusade”—in this case—to defend “Western Christianity.” And can we place genocide in Rwanda and the Balkans or the more recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the present conflicts in Sudan and the Middle East, together with global threats from “Islamic terrorism,” in a new racist reorganization of the planet? What connection do these have—if any—with Nazism? How do we relate attacks by Western powers on southeastern Europe, in the Middle East, or in Central Africa with the fact that European powers dominated these parts of the world from the late nineteenth until the mid-twentieth centuries? What about European and American interventions—even those carried out for supposedly humanitarian purposes or invoking a “responsibility to protect”?

These visions and debates also suggest ways of thinking about sociological issues. For example, what figures are challenging our ways of constructing identity in the postmodern world? Does changing the victim change the type of destructive process we are analyzing? Isn’t killing in the global south just as problematic as killing populations in central and western Europe? Has the

emergence and international recognition of a Jewish state put a definite end to a way of constructing the negative Other, or have the Jews simply been replaced as objects of discrimination by Arabs, Latin American and Asian immigrants, handicapped people, or people with different sexual identities? Do we need to be reminded, perhaps, that some of these groups were also victims of the Nazis and others prior to the Nazi era?

Each of the approaches we have examined raises questions of a different kind. Nevertheless, such questions allow us to construct a vision of history with which to foresee and—who knows?—perhaps change and even improve our uncertain future. This is a perspective that, like Walter Benjamin, is trying to catch the memory of the Nazi genocide “as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (see chapter 4).

I think that some of us—and by “us” I mean not only my own generation but the younger generations as well—have grown a little tired of appeals to “absolute evil” in the context of genocide studies. Evil is a metaphysical concept that distracts us from the processes involved in genocide. It lets the accomplices of genocide sleep soundly in their beds and alienates the experience of genocide from those who continue to suffer its material and symbolic consequences. It creates spheres of ownership in which “Judeocide” is a Jewish problem, “Armenicide” is an Armenian problem, and “Gypsycide” is only a problem for the Roma people. It allows us to return home with a nice warm glow inside after expressing our empathy with the victims and condemning their executioners—Germans, Turks, or whatever—who might just as well have come from another planet. Evil permits us to close our eyes and not think about all those who suffer unheard today while we repeatedly recall the horrors of the past in banal and bombastic ceremonies that sanctify horror without trying to understand what made it possible. Meanwhile, yesterday’s victims are metamorphosed into those of today—and we continue behaving in the same old ways.

Unless we are willing to eschew political correctness and explore new and perhaps heretical ideas—for we will surely make mistakes along the way—we will continue repeating the same cautious and uninspiring lectures, and have the same sad, solemn, and banal memorials—all of which have a sedating and soothing effect and possibly even allow us to feel smug about ourselves, but which are intellectually and socially useless for the task of confronting genocidal social practices.