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Learning the lessons of the Holocaust: A critical exploration

Arthur Chapman

Introduction

Every generation has to confront the Holocaust: how did it happen, who made it happen, who allowed it to happen and who will make sure it does not happen again? Recent events in Paris and the tyranny and barbarity we continue to witness in Iraq and Syria are telling testimony of this need. It is vital that people from all walks of life learn about and understand the Holocaust, for the sake of the people who died and as a way of honouring those who survived, as well as to learn the contemporary lessons from this, the darkest hour of human history.

(The Cabinet Office 2015, 6)

The Holocaust has come to have a prominent place in much international educational discourse during the last generation, since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the USSR that unfroze the memory of the Shoah in much of Europe (Judt 2007, 3) and, in particular, in the years since the Stockholm Declaration of 2000 (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance n.d.) and the mandating of ‘Holocaust Memorial Day’, developments associated with the embedding of the Holocaust in an increasingly globalised Human Rights discourse (Marrus 2016, 148–51). Often, it is the ‘lessons’ of the Holocaust that feature most prominently in Holocaust education language and practice. In England, the Holocaust became one of the small number of specific topics mandated by name in the National Curriculum when it was
first introduced in 1991, and the theme of ‘lessons’ has played an influential role since, in packs of educational materials provided for schools to support them in teaching this topic (Spiro Institute and Holocaust Educational Trust 1997), through programmes of educational visits funded by English and other UK governments focused on drawing ‘lessons’ from Auschwitz (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2012; Jewish News Reporter, 2018; Holocaust Educational Trust, n.d.; Hargrave 2018), in the Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission Report Britain’s Promise to Remember (2015), and in Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations, presentations and assemblies (e.g. Bedford Borough Council 2019).

The idea that we might learn lessons from history has a long pedigree – reaching back to the Ciceronian personification of history as a ‘teacher of life’ (historia magistra vitae) who can help us understand the present and inform action to change the future (Assis 2014, 24–5) and ‘mirror for princes’ literature in the Renaissance (Paul 2015, 125) – and is very widespread in contemporary culture:

- Newspapers frequently offer ‘lessons’ from history, or complain that they have not been learned (e.g. Sandbrook 2009; First Dog on the Moon 2016; Smith 2018)
- Popular histories are frequently structured around lists of ‘lessons’ (e.g. Snyder 2017; Harari 2018)
- Politicians frequently invoke ‘lessons of history’ when calling for action or seeking to justify action (e.g. Gove 2010; May 2018; Major 2018)
- The analogical use of the past to describe and help characterise present problems and concerns is widespread – as in the frequent use of analogies between contemporary contexts and the appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s (Tosh 2008, 64–7) and the use of the Holocaust as a paradigm through which to think a range of contemporary concerns, ranging from gun control to animal exploitation (e.g. Marrus 2016, 137–9; Karlsen, n.d.).

The discourse in which ‘lessons’ are embedded is complex, indicating that we are dealing with a multi-faceted phenomenon. Typically – as in our epigraph, above, from Britain’s Promise to Remember (The Cabinet Office 2015, 6) – this discourse mixes:

- Memory (‘. . . for the sake of the people who died and as a way of honouring those who survived . . .’)
- History (‘. . . how did it happen . . .?’)
• ‘Para-historical’ enquiry (Megill 2002), mixing historical and moral questions (‘. . . who made it happen, who allowed it to happen?’)
• Calls for practical reflection and action (‘. . . who will make sure it does not happen again?’)
• A determination to link the past and the immediate present (‘events in Paris . . . the tyranny and barbarity we continue to witness in Iraq and Syria’).

‘Lessons’ themselves, as we will see below, can take many forms, ranging from meditations on the nature of the human condition, at one end of the spectrum, to the articulation of maxims and guides to action, at the other. Despite their ubiquity, ‘lessons’ are frequently perceived as problematic by historians and history educators, as we will see below. Two recent works by prominent Holocaust historians (Marrus 2016; Cesarani 2016) indicate, perhaps, increasing frustration, in some areas of the historical academy at least, at the ease with which ‘lessons’ and conclusions are drawn from the stories about the Holocaust in our present.

David Cesarani’s last book, Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933–1949 (2016), begins with a critique of the ways in which the Holocaust is constructed in public discourse and in education, things that Cesarani was well-positioned to comment on as an historian and public intellectual who had, for example, written a history of the Holocaust for the Holocaust Educational Trust (Cesarani 1998). ‘The Holocaust has never been so ubiquitous’, Cesarani argued. However, there was ‘a yawning gulf between popular understanding of this history and current scholarship on the subject’ (Cesarani 2016, xxv). As he went on to note:

This is hardly surprising given that most people acquire their knowledge of the Nazi past and the fate of the Jews through novels, films or earnest but ill-informed lessons at school, which frequently rely on novels for young adults or their filmic versions. Misconceptions are reinforced by the edited and instrumentalized versions purveyed by campaigning bodies and the constellation of organizations devoted to education and commemoration. Although these efforts are made in good faith, they are subordinate to extraneous agendas, be it the desire to cultivate an inclusive national identity or the laudable determination to combat anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia and other forms of political, religious or ethnic intolerance. Some lazily draw on an outdated body of research, while others utilize state-of-the-art research but downplay inconvenient aspects of the newer findings.

(Cesarani 2016, xxv)
In other words, Cesarani contended, first, that the Holocaust culturally constructed in much contemporary education and popular culture bore little resemblance to the historical Holocaust, reconstructed in contemporary scholarship, and that this unhistorical Holocaust was pedagogised in educational contexts in highly instrumental ways – the ‘lessons’ drawn from this past were, increasingly, inferences from inaccuracy and, therefore, flawed from the start.

In this ‘standardised version’ the Holocaust is presented as the ‘outcome of racist and anti-Semitic policies’ unfolding from 1933 and leading, from 1939 onwards, through deportation to annihilation in ‘death camps in Poland’, and ending with the collapse of the German Reich in 1945 (Cesarani 2016, xxix–xxx). Cesarani argues that this teleological narrative, inaccurate in a number of ways, ignores the impact of a range of drivers of policy – such as ‘the German way of war’, unexpected victories and later defeats (Cesarani 2016, xxxii–xxxvii) – and imposes a spurious retrospective inevitability on contingent events, which are understood as the bureaucratic and technocratic unfolding of ideologically driven policy formulated early in the Nazi period.

Like Cesarani, Michael Marrus’s Lessons of the Holocaust (2016) is concerned about historical accuracy and about the instrumentalisation of the past. Whilst acknowledging that ‘a degree of trivialization’ is inevitable when complex historical scholarship is refunctioned educationally and re-inscribed into ‘any widely accepted discourse’, Marrus argues against predominant pedagogic and popular cultural framings of this history in terms of ‘formulaic lessons’ (Marrus 2015) that, he argues, stereotype and misconstrue both the past and the future. Furthermore, Marrus contends, a lessons-based approach fails to appreciate the nature and the limits of historical sense-making in the present (Marrus 2016). Marrus’s Lessons of the Holocaust argues, above all, that ‘[a]s acknowledgement of the significance of the Holocaust has increased globally, an unfortunate accompaniment has been a loss of respect for detailed knowledge of what actually happened’ and that the ‘principal lesson of the Holocaust is, therefore, beware of lessons’ (Marrus 2016, 160).

This chapter, which takes a theoretical rather than an empirical focus, will explore the forms that ‘lessons’ of the Holocaust can take, as well as some of the criticisms that have been made, particularly by historians and history educators, of a lessons-based approach, before attempting an appraisal of the affordances and constraints of ‘lessons of the Holocaust’ discourse as educational practice.
‘Learning about’ and ‘learning from’ the Holocaust

Learning ‘about the Holocaust’ denotes a kind of education – formally or informally delivered – through which one comes to knowledge and understanding of the past realities to which the term ‘Holocaust’ refers (e.g. knowledge and understanding of the extermination camp at Treblinka) and also, perhaps, knowledge of the ways in which those past realities are – and have been – understood (for example, knowledge and understanding of The Treblinka Memorial). There is much room for debate and discussion of what children and adults should come to learn about the Holocaust (e.g. What is it most important to know?) and much debate and discussion about how these things should be taught and learned, in general and at different stages of education (e.g. When should learning begin? What aspects should be learned first and how should they be taught?).

When one moves from ‘learning about’ to ‘learning from’ or learning the lessons of the Holocaust, things become more complex. Learning ‘from X’ denotes that one draws conclusions from the study of ‘X’ for some other topic that one learns about, and learning the lessons of X personifies it, such that it teaches one something of a wider applicability. These are both secondary kinds of learning – meta-learning – in which one learns about the significance of what one has learned about the Holocaust for things beyond the Holocaust itself. As they both share this common feature, I will treat ‘of’ and ‘from’ interchangeably in what follows. One cannot learn ‘from’ or ‘of’ if one has not already learned ‘about’, and this learning ‘from’ or ‘of’ involves a transfer of knowledge and understanding from one topic (the Holocaust) to another (for example, how to act in the present and future). This is potentially a highly complex area of learning: there are many ways in which one topic might have significance for another topic; significance and signification are multifaceted; transfer depends upon structural or other types of connection between the topics, and such links can be both hard to make and open to debate. These two types of learning are schematised in Figure 3.1.

Things are more complex still, however, since both the objects that we can ‘learn about’ and ‘learn from’ can be approached through a number of distinct optics or ways of seeing. We can distinguish distinct intellectual optics – or disciplines – that approach the objects of human experience, and that experience itself, in differing and distinctive ways – for example, ‘Visual Arts’ and ‘History’ (Dawes Duraisingh and Boix Mansilla 2007). Disciplines constitute their objects of study in different ways and we can speak of distinct epistemologies linked to different disciplines.
Learning ‘about’ and ‘from’ the Holocaust are likely, then, to mean rather different things depending on the discipline through which the learning is taking place.

In addition to distinguishing, in general, between different disciplinary optics that can be used to understand areas and types of experience, we can distinguish more specifically between differing approaches to the public past. Just as disciplines shape learning, so the approaches to the past that are adopted will have consequences, also, for how that past is understood. As Megill has argued, the principal task of the historian is to ‘attempt to say what actually happened in the past, let the chips fall where they may’ (Megill 2002, 123); nevertheless, ‘historians have the task not only of describing and explaining the past but also of trying to show how the past makes sense for “us” now’ (Megill 2002, 105–6). Making sense of the public past inevitably takes us beyond the empirical and explanatory modes of historical scholarship and into questions of identity (including the identity of ‘us’). This is likely to be particularly true of attempts to make sense of the past in institutions such as schools where the strictly ‘analytic’ stance towards the past central to the discipline of history often sits parallel to learning focused on cultivating what Barton and Levstik call ‘moral’ and ‘identification’ stances (Barton and Levstik 2004, 7). Even in the context of the discipline of history, Megill argues, dealing with topics such as the Holocaust ‘involves some attempt to confront the ethical breach that atrocity makes in our world’ (Megill 2002, 106), and what is true of the academy is likely to be even truer of schools where all teaching is multi-stranded and involves pastoral as well as academic functions, to one degree or another.

Fig 3.1 Learning about and learning from the Holocaust (drawn by author).
Lessons from the Holocaust

Broadly speaking, it seems to me, one can divide the ‘lessons’ that students are urged to learn from the Holocaust into three broad types:

- **Deontological** lessons, of a categorical and unconditional kind, about how to act or think or feel; that is to say, lessons indicating what it simply is, in and of itself, moral to do or to be
- **Consequentialist** lessons, of a conditional or prudential kind, about how to act or think or feel; that is to say, lessons indicating what one should do or how one should be, if one wishes to secure a particular outcome
- **Ontological** lessons about the nature of human and or social or political reality – for example, lessons about ‘human nature’ and what human beings are like in some fundamental sense, or, to give another example, lessons about the fundamental nature of politics, ideology and so on.¹

Deontological lessons are exemplified by the following comment made by a pupil:

All people are equal and . . . no one should be treated like [the Jews were].

(Short 2005, 372)

The following, from an article outlining seven ‘universal’ lessons of the Holocaust published in the Jerusalem Post, is equally deontological in nature:

The first lesson is the importance of zacher, of remembrance. For as we remember the six million Jewish victims of the Shoah – defamed, demonized and dehumanized, as prologue or justification for genocide – we have to understand that the mass murder of six million Jews, and millions of non-Jews, is not a matter of abstract statistics. For unto each person there is a name, an identity; each person is a universe. As our sages tell us, ‘Whoever saves a single life, it is as if he or she has saved an entire universe.’ Conversely, whoever has killed a person, it is as if he has killed an entire universe. Thus, the abiding imperative: We are each, wherever we are, the guarantors of each other’s destiny.

(Cotler 2014)
Cotler’s argument here is about remembrance as a duty and about the imperative duties that individuals owe each other as members of a collective ‘we’, and the register of the text is rich with religious connotation and quotation.

Consequentialist lessons are exemplified by the following pupil comment:

We have to work together with other religions. We have to get to know their side of things and if we get together, things like [the Holocaust] won’t happen.

(Short 2005, 273)

Primo Levi’s argument, made in his 1979 ‘Afterword’ to If This Is A Man, and a number of other places, that ‘in every part of the world, wherever you begin by denying the fundamental liberties of mankind, and equality among people, you move toward the concentration camp system, and it is a road on which it is difficult to halt’ (Levi 1987, 390–1), also embodies a consequentialist imperative and ‘if . . . then . . . ’ reasoning: if you will the denial of liberties and human equality, Levi argues, then you have begun a process that may lead to Auschwitz.

Ontological lessons are exemplified by this comment by a History teacher:

[I]t is not something which is one country or one particular set of circumstances . . . actually maybe it is something deeper about the human condition. It’s something that actually exists within all of us.

(Pettigrew et al. 2009, 81)

Equally, the following – elaborating the sixth of eight ‘general theses’ developed to explain why ‘ethnic cleansing’ occurs (Mann 2005, 2) – takes an ontological approach, albeit of a more prosaic kind generalising about the nature of socio-political processes and exemplifying ‘lessons’ about the nature of ethnic cleansing derived from comparative sociological analysis of the Holocaust, other cases of genocide and case studies of ethnic cleansing:

6. Murderous cleansing is rarely the initial intent of perpetrators. It is rare to find evil geniuses plotting mass murder from the very beginning. Not even Hitler did so. Murderous cleansing typically emerges as a kind of Plan C, developed only after … responses to a perceived ethnic threat fail.

(Mann 2005, 7)
All three types of ‘lesson’ can be differentiated further in various ways: in terms of the degrees of specificity or generality with which they are offered, in terms of the content of the claims that are made and in terms of the disciplinary frame through which the ‘lessons’ are stated. It is worth noting – in general – that there are likely to be relationships between different modes of apprehending the world (e.g. subject disciplines) and different lesson types: universal deontological ‘lessons’, for example, are more likely to be found in disciplines such as theology or moral philosophy, that explore universal principles, than they are to be found in disciplines like history, that explore contextualised particulars.

Debates on the validity of a lessons-based approach to the Holocaust

A range of criticisms have been made about a lessons-based approach to Holocaust education. We can distinguish between objections to lessons per se and objections to lessons of particular kinds. Objections of the first type are often made by historians and history educators, as we shall see below, and are exemplified by the following claims, that:

- the Holocaust is not a suitable topic from which to learn lessons for the present and the future
- a ‘lessons’-based approach presupposes degrees of knowledge that we simply cannot have of both past and future
- lessons distort history by imposing a moralising presentist agenda on our approach to the past
- a focus on lessons can simplify and distort through anachronism and moncausal explanation.

A related criticism – and one that is made by an advocate of particular types of ‘lesson’ – is the following:

- That lessons are typically vacuous – too vague to be of value in achieving their aims.

These objections will be reviewed in turn prior to attempting an overall evaluation.
Lessons rest on a category error and inference from the extreme to the normal

Peter Novick has expressed doubts about learning lessons from the Holocaust ‘because of its extremity’ (Novick 1999, 13). The objections are of two types.

First, Novick objects on ‘pedagogic grounds’, contending, although Novick does not use precisely these terms, that drawing lessons involves a kind of category error: an inference from (a) extreme experiences and/or actions in extreme circumstances to (b) action and/or experience in normal circumstances: ‘[l]essons for dealing with the sort of issues that confront us in ordinary life, public or private, are not likely to be found in this most extraordinary of events’ (Novick 1999, 13). Novick argues that we should focus on ‘the behaviour of normal Americans in normal times’, if we want to learn ‘important lessons about how easily we become victimizers’ (Novick 1999, 13).

Second, Novick objects to ‘lessons’ on ‘pragmatic grounds’ (Novick 1999, 14), arguing that, far from sensitising ‘us to oppression and atrocity’, the extremity of the Holocaust can set our moral bar too high and thus result in ‘trivializing crimes of lesser magnitude’ (Novick 1999, 14). This, Novick contends, happened during the Bosnian war in the early 1990s, when efforts to deploy a ‘Holocaust framework’ (Novick 1999, 253) to interpret events failed, and when doubts were expressed about whether ethnic cleansing actions were truly genocidal, thus meriting international intervention, or merely atrocious (Novick 1999, 14).

Lessons presuppose knowledge that we cannot have

Whereas Novick’s doubts about lessons rest on the extremity of the events of the Holocaust, Marrus’s scepticism about ‘lessons’ arises from epistemic doubts about the viability of the types of knowledge of both past and future that he argues are presupposed in lessons-based approaches (Marrus 2015 and 2016).

Lessons arise, Marrus argues, when we ruminate ‘on the conclusions that historians draw from their study of the past’ (Marrus 2016, 32). Marrus objects to attempting to infer the universal from the subjective and the particular: ‘history is subject to interpretation, and the effort to derive universally accepted lessons from it [is] a hazardous enterprise’ (Marrus 2016, 32). Interpretations, he goes on to argue, are highly
variable and shaped by a range of considerations linked to the subjectivity of the historian enquiring into the past. Marrus argues that to draw lessons is to take significant intellectual risks, by making claims about things that it is very hard to know with any certainty – the past and the future (Figure 3.2).

Of the future, Marrus argues that ‘without having a good idea about how things are likely to turn out, one is hardly in a position to recommend one thing or another’ (Marrus 2016, 50), and he points to failed futures-past in order to underline the folly of projecting the past into the future, such as the Maginot Line (35–6), constructed on the basis of erroneous predictions about the nature of future wars grounded in the assumption that the future would resemble the past.

Marrus further argues that lessons-based approaches are premised on the erroneous assumption ‘that the past is a given, and that the real problem is understanding the future’ (Marrus 2016, 39), an assumption that Marrus criticises by discussing how interpretations of the outbreak of World War I have changed since the 1960s: ‘history is subject constantly to interpretation, that the focus of history constantly shifts, depending upon what questions people choose to address’ (Marrus 2016, 48).

Finally, Marrus advances a more fundamental objection to ‘lessons’ – one that would apply even if an historian were to succeed in creating a perdurable interpretation and successfully predicting the future. It is not only our interpretations of the past and the future that are subject to change, but human action and human contexts of action themselves, such that what may have held true in the past may no longer apply in the future:

World views change. Cultures operate differently. Leaders face new challenges. What moved some at one time might not work in another. . . . Drawing lessons . . . on the basis of what people did . . . becomes a very complicated process indeed, not to mention an extremely hazardous one.

(Marrus 2016, 42)
Lessons moralise history in inappropriate ways

Writing in 1998 and 2001, Nicholas Kinloch developed a critique of what he described as a ‘dangerously non-historical set of assumptions’ (Kinloch 1998, 44) underlying the use of Holocaust history to explore moral and other lessons of the past (Kinloch 1998, 45). Kinloch argued that history teachers should ‘help their students become better historians’ (Kinloch 2001, 13) and ‘start and end with what happened and why’ without burdening their history lessons with ‘any attempt at “making the world a better place”’. Kinloch objected to using analogies with Nazism – a paradigm of an extreme case – to learn lessons about Britain, a dramatically different context:

Of course there is much racism in British society. The extermination of ethnic minorities is not yet, however, government policy. Nor do most of us believe that it is likely to become so. Racism will not be eradicated by drawing false comparisons with Nazi Germany.

(Kinloch 1998, 45)

In addition to challenging the appropriateness of using the Holocaust to learn about contemporary anti-racism, Kinloch objected to the efficacy of trying to use history in these ways:

. . . students, in the real world beyond their classrooms, will continue to make their own moral and social judgements, probably not really much affected by their well-meaning History teachers.

(Kinloch 1998, 46)

Kinloch also objected, in principle, to using history to teach morality:

There may be good reason to teach children that killing other human beings is generally undesirable. Whether the history class is really the place for such lessons, however, remains debatable.

(Kinloch 2001, 13)

Paul Salmons challenges Kinloch’s arguments, as we shall see below. However, like Kinloch, he expresses reservations about what he regards as the simplifying, unhistorical and moralising approach to the past that is often embodied in ‘lessons’:

Comfortable ‘explanations’ that people made the wrong moral choices may lead to resolutions that we will act more morally than
our forebears. We can then experience the catharsis of saying ‘Never again’, and congratulate ourselves on our strong moral values. . . . Our attempt to galvanise our students to stand against injustice today then comes at the cost of denigrating people in the past, whose behaviour we have not explained.

(Salmons 2001, 35)

Furthermore, Salmons also argues that simplifying approaches have self-defeating aspects: in the attempt to ensure that children learn the right lessons, young people are presented with conclusions to consume rather than challenged to enquire into the complexity of the past; and that we thus leave ‘young people open to manipulation and coercion from those who use the past to push their own social, political or other agendas’ (Salmons 2010, 58).

Finally, Salmons argues that a simplistic ‘lessons-focused’ approach trivialises the Holocaust in important ways:

The Holocaust is frequently invoked in the classroom to teach universal lessons about the dangers of man’s inhumanity to man, the evils of racism and the need for a more tolerant society. The sentiments are noble and important, but do we really need the Holocaust to demonstrate their value? Racism is wrong not because of the gas chambers of Treblinka, but – intellectually – for its weak and faulty view of human beings, and – morally – for the widespread injustice and suffering it causes in the contemporary world on a daily basis.

(Salmons 2010, 58)

Lessons can simplify and distort past realities through anachronism and monocausal explanation

Both Salmons and Marrus agree in arguing that a focus on contemporary lessons distorts the history of the Holocaust, refactoring it for contemporary ends in ways that obscure more than they illuminate. Salmons contends – as did Cesarani in objecting to an inaccurate ‘standardised version’ of Holocaust history – that a ‘lessons’-based approach can inhibit our understanding of the Holocaust itself:

While it is clearly the case that without the Nazis’ racist ideology and radical antisemitism the Holocaust could not have happened,
still to reduce the Holocaust to a lesson in anti-racism is an oversimplification which . . . does not reveal the complexities of historical process to the student. It leads to the assumption that there was a straight path from racist ideology to the extinction of a people. It overlooks the possibility that there was a ‘twisted road to Auschwitz’.

(Salmons 2010, 59)

Marrus makes his case against neat, pre-packaged Holocaust-history by critiquing a number of ‘lessons’ frequently invoked in contemporary Holocaust discourse (Marrus 2016, 155–6), including the ‘lessons’ that:

- It began with words.
- All that it takes for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.
- One person can make a difference.

Marrus’s objection to these lessons, as to the other examples that he discusses, is that they impose anachronistic assumptions on the past and – as often as not – present simplistic and irrelevant explanations for past action or draw facile and inaccurate conclusions from individual past actions about past action-contexts in general.

In respect of the proposition ‘it began with words’, which Marrus shows has been used to validate deprivations of liberty encroaching on free speech in France and elsewhere, he argues that the ‘lesson’ confuses cause with consequence (many Germans became antisemitic because they became Nazi and not the other way around). It also elevates one of many causes to particular importance with ‘no grounds’ for doing so, and thus ‘distorts the history we claim to be trying to understand’ (Marrus 2016, 154–5).

In respect of the ‘lesson’ ‘all that it takes for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing’ Marrus shows, again, that this is a distortion of history – many good men did much more than nothing, often at great personal cost, and still the Holocaust happened – and argues that it ‘presents a childishly simple view of how genocide functions’ (Marrus 2016, 156).

Finally, objecting to the lesson that ‘[o]ne person can make a difference’ Marrus argues that many performed brave actions in defiance of the policies of the Nazis but with no effect whatever on the overall direction of policy. Like Salmons, Marrus finds implicit derogation of past actors in the implied moral judgements these lessons make and concludes that,
overall, the approach recommended by this ‘lesson’ ‘obscures the historical reality of wartime genocide and falsifies the situation that bystanders actually faced’ (Marrus 2016, 157).

Lessons can be vacuous – too vague to be of value

In a number of papers, between 2003 and 2015, Geoffrey Short has made a qualified argument for the importance of lessons and for an antiracist approach to learning about the Holocaust, in direct and critical response to many of the authors discussed in this paper (such as Kinloch and Salmons) and others who have prioritised an historical approach to lessons. Short contends that antiracist Holocaust education should not simply be a matter for historians and that others – notably Citizenship teachers – are particularly well-placed to contribute to teaching antiracist lessons from these events (Short 2005, 379). Short’s case for lessons is qualified because, like the other authors we have discussed, he finds many of the lessons that are advocated by Holocaust educators to be ‘trite’ – a judgment that Short passes (Short 2003, 278), for example, on the passage below:

The Holocaust reminds us that hatred of others who are different from ourselves and whom we place beyond the pale of humanity can lead only to group violence and atrocity. It tells us that any society, however culturally, scientifically and technologically advanced, can become totally criminal once it loses the ability and the will to distinguish between right and wrong.

(Spiro Institute/Holocaust Educational Trust 1997, 22; cited in Short 2003, 278)

He argues that there is poor provision for explicit learning of detailed practical lessons in education in England and that it is not surprising, therefore, to find – as he did, for example, in empirical studies of Holocaust Memorial Day in 2004 – deficiencies in aspects of children’s learning about concrete action to prevent racism. As Short put it, summing up his findings:

[M]ost often the ‘lesson’ they had in mind amounted to no more than a plea for greater tolerance. Nearly a third of the group was adamant that all individuals are of equal worth and that we should act towards one another accordingly. They either stated or implied that differences in ethnic or religious identity could never justify
discrimination. . . . Only a dozen students articulated a clear-cut lesson in the sense of proposing action of some kind intended to avert genocide.

(Short 2005, 373–4)

As has been said, Short’s key focus, where lessons are concerned, is on antiracist education and on measures understood to be essential to the prevention of escalating racism and persecution. He argues that the key focus of antiracist education about the Holocaust should be not on the genocide of European Jews during the Second World War but, rather, on the processes through which the Nazi party secured dictatorship in the 1930s and on ‘the way in which a relatively normal society was transformed into a highly abnormal one infused with a lethal racist ideology (Short 2005, 369). As Short put it in a 2003 paper:

[The lessons provided by the Holocaust depend to some extent on how it is defined. If it is seen as referring only to the mass killing of Jews that occurred between 1941 and 1945 then the scope for profitable engagement is limited, though far from lacking. If, however, teachers operate on a broader canvas and focus on the background to the Holocaust, the lessons resonate more loudly, for they have a firmer purchase on contemporary society where racist groups operate both within and beyond the bounds of legitimate politics.]

(Short 2003, 285)

If students engage in reflection and study of this period, Short argues, they are likely to come to ‘treat any manifestation of racism with concern’, to appreciate ‘the danger of ignoring an embryonic racist movement’ (Short 2003, 285). A study of events antecedent to the Holocaust will alert ‘students to the main risk inherent in unrestricted free speech, namely, the possibility of racist demagogues garnering mass support for their dangerous and simplistic solutions to complex problems’ (Short 2003, 285).²

The kinds of lesson that Short advocates (Short 2005) include, for example:

- Appreciation of the nature and significance of stereotyping and scapegoating
- Appreciation of the importance of legislation to outlaw incitement to religious or racial hatred
• Appreciation of the importance of banning of overtly racist organisations
• Awareness of the international dimension to the genocide and the need for bodies such as the UN to assume a more proactive and interventionist role.

In more recent work, Short has repeated many of these themes, under the categories ‘Lessons Relating to the Nature of Racism’ (including ‘that Nazism, in respect of its racial policies is an unmitigated evil’), (Short 2015, 456) and ‘Lessons Unrelated to the Nature of Racism’ (including ‘the realisation that ordinary people are not necessarily reduced to the role of impotent bystanders in the face of evil’) (Short 2015, 459).

Discussion: Affordances and constraints of a lessons-based approach to Holocaust education

Many of the arguments outlined above have received critical comment and response in the literature. Kinloch’s argument for a sharp boundary between history and moral reflection, for example, was criticised rapidly on publication, in the letters pages (e.g. Meagher 1999) and subsequent articles (Il­lingworth 2000; Salmons 2001) in the journal in which it was published. Counter-arguments included the claim that many of the historical questions that scholars pursue are also moral questions (e.g. ‘How could “ordinary men” become brutal murderers?’), the claim that ‘learning the history of the Holocaust and drawing moral lessons are not mutually exclusive’ (Salmons 2001, 35) and the claim that, in practice, in learning the history of the Holocaust ‘pupils will’, inevitably and naturally, ‘be disturbed into reflection of a deep and personal kind’ (e.g. Meagher 1999, 3).

Rather than engaging with each argument in turn, I propose to consider the wider question, implicit in almost all of them, about the value and the limitation of a specifically historical approach to reflection on the implications of the Holocaust for subsequent generations.

There are some significant tensions in Marrus’s arguments for the limitations of an historical approach. Marrus’s argument for the impossibility of ‘lessons’ grounded in the fragility of our knowledge of past and future seems, for example, to sit uneasily with his wider endeavour to evaluate the adequacy of particular ‘lessons’ by testing their consistency with what we know about the events of the Holocaust. There is also, perhaps, a presumption, in setting high criteria of unchangeability
for lessons linking past and future, of an a-historical standard of judgement. It is, indeed, commonplace, in the philosophy of history and in historiography, that both the past and the future can change – and that we can speak of both ‘futures past’ and ‘past pasts’ (Koselleck 2004; Danto 2007). The radical instability of our knowledge of the past by no means follows from this, however: although our accounts of the past can change dramatically over time, for much of the story for much of the time, many of the changes are marginal rather than central and incremental rather than dramatic. And even if the future does turn out to be radically different from what we currently expect, it does not follow that one should not infer conclusions for present or future action from the past as it is known to us now. If location in time – historicity – is a fundamental condition of human action, then knowledgeable human action can only ever mean action informed by the best of our knowledge now.

It is true, however, that we should be very circumspect in reasoning consequentially about future action on the basis of what we know about the Holocaust, and not simply because our knowledge is – as it always must be – subject to revision and change. As disabling here is the fact that the Holocaust – like all unfolding narratives – was bounded by and specific to the times and places in which it happened. This is not to say, however, that we have to read it in that way. As Todorov argues, we can read histories ‘literally’, as referring, solely and exclusively, to the states of affairs, actors and events that they describe and narrate, and we can also read histories ‘paradigmatically’, treating what is narrated ‘as one instance among others of a more general category, in which case it can be used as a model by which to understand new situations and new perpetrators’ (Todorov 1994, 258). This is, of course, what happens when the Holocaust is understood as a genocide – an instance of a wider category. However, understanding a general category entails comparison and consideration of cases that fall within it, a conclusion that suggests that any inferences that may arise and enable future cases to be understood cannot be ‘lessons of the Holocaust’ alone. ‘Consequential’ learning about the dynamics of social and political processes – of the kind that enables Michael Mann to differentiate ‘types of violence and cleansing in intergroup relations’ and to model the conditions under which genocides have arisen to date (Mann 2005, 12) – requires both the kinds of attention to the specific histories and details of those histories that Cesarani points to when critiquing the teleological ‘standard version’ of Holocaust history (Cesarani 2016, xxix) and a comparative historical sociological approach that goes beyond the boundaries of narrative history.
There are certainly likely to be dangers arising, however, from generalising prematurely about future possibilities from a limited range of data, and this seems likely to arise if we begin, overly confidently, to focus on the kinds of action that we ‘know’ are necessary to pre-empt the rise of murderous racisms. Although it may be true, as Short argues, that banning overtly racist organisations is likely to make a positive contribution to preventing the spread of racial hatred (Short 2015), there is no guarantee that it will do so, and it is conceivable that focusing on actions that previous experience indicates will be important may lead to a failure to see novel and specific aspects of the processes that confront us in the present. As Tosh has argued:

The . . . benefits of analogy . . . depend not on a presumed convergence between past and present, but on the demonstration of difference alongside similarity. . . . Our readiness to see repetition between past and present must always be qualified by a presumption of difference . . . analogies which serve to refine understanding of the present are a genuine asset to critical debate.

(Tosh 2008, 77)

Whilst it is crucial to have empirical controls placing limits on the kinds of inference one seeks to draw from the past – of the kind that allow Marrus to point to the hollowness of what purport to be universal ‘lessons’ of an ontological kind, such as ‘One person can make a difference’ (Marrus 2016, 156) – it is important, also, to acknowledge the limitations of purely historical approaches to the Holocaust. Whilst detailed historical study can help to give students some sense of the enormities of the Holocaust and to experience the ontological shock that follows from realising the atrocities that human groups are capable of inflicting on each other, historians do not have the tools to answer the compelling ontological and ethical questions that often arise:

Arno Mayer’s question, ‘Why did the heavens not darken?,’ . . . asks not about causation but about ultimate justification. Mayer’s question is ontological in character. It is the question as to how the universe itself could justify such an event. . . . But it is not itself a historical question. The historian qua historian is powerless to answer it.

(Megill 2002, 105)
In other words, many of the ‘Why?’ questions that often arise as students study the Holocaust are beyond the scope of the discipline of history to answer. Even though historical perspectives are essential to understanding what the Holocaust was – because ‘learning about’ must precede ‘learning from’ or ‘lessons of’ – there is a further limitation to the role played by historical understanding in this and other aspects of making sense of the world. As Mark Day, Herman Paul and others have argued (Day 2008; Paul 2015), to be human is to live multiple forms of relationship to the past – for example, material, aesthetic, political, epistemic and moral relationships (Paul 2015) and, as Gottlieb and Wineburg have shown, in a study of readings of historical and non-historical documents by a range of readers including religious and secular historians, not only can individuals approach the past through differing frameworks of assumptions, but the same individuals can also engage in simultaneous or serial ‘epistemic switching’ between different ways of knowing, when the task they are engaged in has salience for different aspects of their personal and professional identities (Gottlieb and Wineburg 2012, 114).

Coda: ‘Understand in order to judge’

I will end this chapter with some reflections on Primo Levi’s thinking about the broader significance of the Holocaust. I end in this way because Levi was a Holocaust survivor – an inmate in Auschwitz III/Monowitz-Buna for 11 months prior to liberation in January 1945 – and one who reflected at length on the wider meaning of the events he had experienced between 1945 and his death in 1987. Levi’s works are instructive in a number of senses and not least in that they attend to many of the considerations that we have discussed whilst also refusing many of the binaries that tend to structure debate on ‘lessons’ (Levi 2015, I:xxx–xxxiii).

Primo Levi wrote about Auschwitz for many reasons – to achieve ‘interior liberation’ (Levi 1987, 15) to ‘shout from the rooftops’ (Levi 1988, 138), ‘to furnish documentation for a quiet study of the human mind’ (Levi 1987, 15), ‘to understand . . . in order to judge’ (Levi 1987, 143) – and always with a sense of moral urgency and purpose. Because ‘it happened . . . it can happen again’ and ‘it can happen everywhere’ (Levi 1988, 167), Levi argued, and he found parallels in the actions of the conquistadores, in the Argentina of the generals and in the Cambodia of Khmer Rouge (Levi 1988, 9–10; 66–7). What had happened, then, was
minatory and a warning – there were ‘lessons’ to be learned in the present from the Holocaust.

However, in *The Drowned and The Saved* Levi argued that the road from racism and intolerance to Auschwitz was a complex one: although ‘denying the fundamental liberties of mankind, and equality among people’ (Levi 1987, 391) was a necessary condition for Auschwitz, it was not sufficient to bring it about. ‘The German slaughter’ arose, he argued, from ‘the doctrine of contempt’, was enabled by ‘a desire for servitude and smallness of soul’ among its perpetrators, and was possible only because of the concurrence of a number of factors (the state of war; German technological and organisational perfectionism; Hitler’s will and charisma; the lack in Germany of solid democratic roots), not very numerous, all of them indispensable but insufficient if taken singly.

(Levi 1988, 66)

The specificity of the concentration camp universe arose from its historical context, its location in its time and place. The behaviour of Jews who did not emigrate in the 1930s and who complied with Nazi orders during the Holocaust, right up to the doors of the gas chambers in many cases, and the behaviour of prisoners who did not fight back or try to escape, had to be contextualised to be understood, and Levi contextualised using historicist tools (Beiser 2011). Levi protested against ‘a stereotyped and anachronistic conception of history’ (Levi 1988, 132) and argued that:

One must beware of hindsight and stereotypes. More generally one must beware of the error of judging distant epochs and places with the yardstick that prevails in the here and now: an error all the more difficult to avoid as the distance in space and time increases.

(1988, 134–5)

Jews did not emigrate, in ways that people in Levi’s audiences often thought they should have done, he argued, because to leave the ‘fatherland’ meant something fundamentally different to people in the 1930s than it does for ‘citizens eternally on the move’ in ‘countries and times of intense mobility’ (Levi 1988, 132–3); German Jews did not emigrate, or see what with ‘hindsight’ seems so obvious, he argued, because ‘like their “Aryan” quasi-compatriots they loved law and order and . . . were organically incapable of conceiving of a terrorism directed by the state’ (Levi 1988, 134).
Levi’s arguments in *The Drowned and The Saved* imply that the effort to understand Auschwitz, by those who were not there and for whom these events are ‘distant, blurred, historical’ (Levi 1988, 128), entails at least two forms of engagement, both of which challenge simplifications, binaries and stereotypes: first, the effort to grasp the context from which Auschwitz arose, and, second, an effort at empathy or rational understanding, that aims to ‘perceive the experience of others’ (Levi 1988, 128) in terms of the situated knowledge, assumptions and forms of thinking operative in their time and their context and not in ours. Understanding, then, entailed the contestation of stereotypes and presentism and a focus on context and specificity. Stereotypical binary thinking was at the base of the rhetorics of hatred that helped to drive the Holocaust as a historical process, but they alone were insufficient to explain it since they were mediated in specific cultural contexts of belief and expectation. To understand what had happened one had also to contest the operation of precisely the same tendency to simplify and reduce complexity in the present.

For Levi, then, a focus on judgement, ‘lessons’ and moral reflection was essential when responding to the enormity of the Holocaust, and contextualised historical thinking was essential to success in these tasks. Thinking about lessons involved a combination of historical and ethical thinking and a form of thinking that attended closely to specificity rather than one that traded in absolutes and universals.

**Notes**

1. Deontology, consequentialism and ontology are all explained systematically in open access articles in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Alexander and Moore 2016; Sinnott-Armstrong 2015; Epstein 2018). The contrast between deontological and consequentialist imperatives is a common contrast in moral and political philosophy, used, for example, to differentiate Kantian and Utilitarian positions.

2. The proposition that it is most profitable not to study the Holocaust itself but, rather, to focus on discrimination in the pre-war period, is one that is certainly likely to be questioned by historians – not least because it appears to embody the kind of teleology that Cesarani argued against and the assumption that the road to Auschwitz was much straighter and predetermined than scholarship allows us to conclude it was.

**References**


Salmons, P. 2010. ‘Universal meaning or historical understanding? The Holocaust in history and history in the curriculum’, Teaching History 141: 57–63.


