

The Holocaust and the Trial of Modernity

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Maximilian Aue, the protagonist of Jonathan Littell's controversial novel *The Kindly Ones*, is a rising star in the SS assigned to a key position in Heinrich Himmler's Ministry of the Interior. As part of his new job, Aue must ensure maximum output from the concentration camps' labor force. To this end, he meets with Gerhard Maurer, the head of the *Arbeitseinsatz* ("labor intake") division. Maurer, "a man still young, without any diplomas but endowed with solid professional experience in accounting and management," impresses Aue greatly:

I was to see him again several times afterwards and to correspond with him regularly, always with the same satisfaction. Maurer represented for me a certain ideal National Socialist who, though he must be a man with a *Weltanschauung*, still has to be a man who gets results. And concrete, measurable results formed Maurer's very life. Although he himself hadn't invented all the measures set in place by the *Arbeitseinsatz*, he had out of whole cloth created the impressive statistical data collection system that now covered all the WVHA camps. This system he patiently explained to

me, itemizing the standardized, pre-printed forms that each camp had to fill out and send in, pointing out the most important figures and the right way to interpret them.¹

For Aue, this combination of the correct worldview and the ability to get “concrete, measurable results” makes Gerhard Maurer, the diligent clerk, an “ideal National Socialist”—and many readers, removed as they are from Nazi ideology, would no doubt agree. However powerful our aversion to the “ideal” embodied by Maurer, he aptly reflects the puzzling duality that is the Nazi phenomenon. If there is any mystery in the rise of the Third Reich, in the crimes it committed against humanity in general and the Jews in particular, it lies precisely in the inconceivable dissonance between the barbaric ideology of the Nazis and the “modern,” rational manner with which their actions were carried out during the darkest period of German history.

Yet, according to a well-established opinion within certain intellectual circles, there is no mystery here at all. What seems to be a clash of two opposite sides of the human soul is actually proof of the strong affinity between them. It is no surprise that Nazism adopted modern characteristics so easily, since modernity itself had something “Nazi” about it from its very beginning.

It is not difficult to see how this opinion fits into the more general trend—extremely popular within contemporary academia—of harshly criticizing Western culture in general and the Enlightenment tradition in particular. This radical school of thought strives tirelessly to expose the broken promises of humanism, science, and reason—the mainstays of the West since the eighteenth century—and reveal the truth of their repression and exploitation. According to the historical narrative constructed by these “critical theorists,” Nazism was not a sudden stumbling block on European civilization’s road to progress, but rather a milestone on that route; the Holocaust, likewise, was not the product of a deviant ideology that turned its back on the values of the Enlightenment, but an extreme and horrendous, yet utterly logical, upshot of that very worldview. “In the apocalypse

at Auschwitz,” declared French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “it is no more or less than the essence of the West that is revealed—and that has not ceased since that time to reveal itself.”² In a similar vein, Jewish Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in his *Modernity and the Holocaust*, claimed the Holocaust was “a legitimate resident in the house of modernity; indeed, one who would not be at home in any other house.”³ Jewish American theologian Richard Rubenstein went so far as to state that “Genocide is an intrinsic expression of modern civilization as we know it,”⁴ while Israeli philosopher Adi Ophir placed the “death theater” of Nazi concentration camps on the same continuum with Western democracies:

Auschwitz is, among other things, the specific combination of putting to death by gas, mass killing, and methodical and orderly extermination, which allowed the death machine to operate with such horrifying efficiency. When this machine is broken down into its component parts, one finds that its technologies and the practices maintaining it exist or are ready for operation in various combinations at the heart of Western society, not only far away beyond its borders, and that they are an inseparable part of the systems of domination and government in almost every contemporary democratic regime, and of the power relations within and outside these.⁵

The arguments incriminating modernity in the catastrophe of the Holocaust certainly have their appeal. They skillfully combine intellectual sophistication with compelling moral rhetoric. Yet as we will discover, they are based on flawed and misleading analyses, emphasizing certain aspects of the “project of modernity” while obscuring others that do not coincide with the dark image they seek to conjure. Exposing the fallacies upon which these accusations rest is therefore not only necessary for redressing outrageous historiographical distortions. It is also an ethical imperative, replacing as it does the moral despair so fashionable these days with a genuine—and necessary—faith in man’s ability to redeem himself.

There is, of course, good ground for identifying Nazism as a typical modern phenomenon. The Third Reich was not a backward state, after all, but a scientific and technological superpower. In his insightful study *The Nazi War on Cancer*, Robert Proctor, a historian of science at Stanford University, lists the technological achievements of German scientists under Hitler's rule, including developments in such fields as television broadcasting, electronic computers, the improvement of the jet engine, experiments in magnetic recording, atomic research, the design of intercontinental ballistic missiles, and the invention of the ejection seat.⁶

Yet while no one can deny the significance of these accomplishments, it is doubtful whether they may be attributed to "Nazi science." True, such research was conducted under the watchful eye (and generally with the encouragement) of the Nazi regime, by scientists who were in many cases of Nazi persuasion and who frequently employed "Nazi methods" (one atrocious example is that of experiments performed by German physicians on camp inmates to examine the influence of changes in atmospheric pressure on the human body). Yet the science itself—the collected data, the inventions, and the improvements it produced—had nothing German or Nazi about it, just as Albert Einstein's theory of relativity is not particularly "Jewish," nor is Darwinism an "Anglo-Victorian" doctrine. Anton Chekhov, the Russian author and playwright, put it best when he wrote: "There is no national science just as there is no national multiplication table; what is national is *no longer science*."⁷

Slightly more complicated are those fields of German scientific research that were enlisted to validate the Nazi worldview and served it with enthusiasm. The Ahnenerbe Institute, for example, which was founded by Himmler in 1935, employed scholars from a variety of disciplines in an attempt to trace the allegedly ancient roots of the Aryan race. To that end, institute members plundered museums throughout occupied Europe and conducted cruel experiments on human beings.⁸ Even greater resources

were invested in the Nazi policy of “racial hygiene,” designed to ensure the health and vitality of the German nation by ridding it of all vestiges of biological contamination. This policy, which recruited the services of physicians, psychiatrists, and geneticists from all corners of the Reich, led to the sterilization of approximately 400,000 people (the infirm, the handicapped, the mentally ill, and anyone deemed “unworthy” of reproducing); to the murder of 200,000 people under the “euthanasia” program at the beginning of World War II; and, eventually, to the ultimate act of biological “purification”: the extermination of European Jewry.⁹

The preoccupation with racial hygiene was not unique to the Third Reich, however. In 1883, the English naturalist Francis Galton, Charles Darwin’s half-cousin, coined the term “eugenics” (from the Greek prefix *eu*, meaning “good” or “well,” and the suffix *gen*, meaning “source”) to describe the quest for the enhancement of humanity by nurturing superior—and weeding out inferior—hereditary qualities. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the eugenics movement flourished in the United States and Europe, its growing influence manifest in legislation and public policy. In 1907, for example, Indiana passed a law enacting compulsory sterilization of criminals and mentally challenged individuals residing in state institutions; by the 1930s similar acts had been passed in thirty other states. Sterilization laws were also passed in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and Finland, among others. Ironically, it was the biggest eugenics experiment in history—the one that took place under the Nazi regime—that finally discredited the eugenics movement in the West, although some traces of its ideas have remained with us to this day.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, these facts are enough, so far as the radical critics of the West are concerned, to put all of modern society in the Nuremberg trials’ defendants’ dock. Michel Foucault, one of postmodernism’s most prominent representatives, skillfully linked the Nazis’ eugenics obsession with its bourgeois mentality. According to Foucault:

Nazism was not invented by the great erotic madmen of the twentieth century but by the most sinister, boring and disgusting petit bourgeois imaginable. Himmler was a vaguely agricultural type who married a nurse. We must understand that the concentration camps were born from the conjoined imagination of a hospital nurse and a chicken farmer. A hospital plus a chicken yard—that's the phantasm behind the concentration camps.... The Nazis were charwomen in the bad sense of the term. They worked with brooms and dusters, wanting to purge society of everything they considered unsanitary, dusty, filthy; syphilitics, homosexuals, Jews, those of impure blood, Blacks, the insane. It's the foul petit bourgeois dream of racial hygiene that underlies the Nazi dream.¹¹

Foucault viewed Nazism as one of the many incarnations of what he called "bio-power": a form of political control whose main interest is the "administration of bodies and the calculated management of life."¹² Bio-power manages and directs the biological processes of "propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, [and] all the conditions that can cause these to vary."¹³ In other words, it is not content, like the old sovereign authority, with the right "to let live"; it seeks to control life entirely, "its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls."¹⁴ According to Foucault, "bio-politics" appeared in the eighteenth century, and from its inception used life sciences and modern demographics to discipline institutions and regulate populations. Nazism simply brought this enterprise to its climax, actualizing the murderous potential harbored by modern bio-politics from the very start. "If genocide is indeed the dream of modern power," wrote Foucault, "this is not because of the recent return to the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of the population."¹⁵

The claim that genocide is “the dream of modern power” features prominently in a controversial essay by the German historian Detlev Peukert, “The Genesis of the ‘Final Solution’ from the Spirit of Science.” The text was first published in German in 1989, but gained renown with its translation into English in 1993.¹⁶ Peukert, a former member of the German communist party, claimed that the Holocaust was the inevitable culmination of the development of modern science. “What was new about the ‘Final Solution’ in world-historical terms was the fact that it resulted from a fatal racist dynamism present within the human and social sciences.”¹⁷ The aspiration of German physicians, biologists, and sociologists to establish a “clean” and “healthy” human society, purged of all “destructive” elements (such as Jews and handicaps), was intimately linked with the grandiose scientific desire to overcome death—if not that of the individual organism, then that of the collective body of the nation. According to Peukert, “The ‘death of God’ in the nineteenth century gave science dominion over life. For each individual human being, however, the borderline experience of death rebuts this claim to dominion. Science therefore sought its salvation in the specious immortality of the racial *Volkskörper*, for the sake of which mere real, and hence imperfect, life could be sacrificed.”¹⁸ The driving force behind the Holocaust, Peukert would have us believe, was not antisemitism but the corrupt soul of science.

Such charges are as groundless as they are pretentious. Peukert (and, to a certain extent, Foucault as well) accuses “modern science” or “modern forces” of direct responsibility for genocide, citing marginal examples that, unfortunately, have no bearing on mainstream scientific research and practice. The Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt once argued that “The exception is more interesting than the rule.”¹⁹ Radical scholars insist on constantly confusing the two.

Indeed, one need not look far to see that “Nazi science” was little more than pseudo-science, governed by a political and ideological agenda. National Socialism wished to lend itself a scientific aura, but its attempt to create an ideologically “pure” science, free of all “decadent” elements, gave

rise to a hideous farce instead (“Soviet science,” nurtured by communist Russia, fared no better). The crimes of the Ahnenerbe and of the Frankfurt Institute for Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene (where Mengele and his colleagues received their training) were not the bitter fruits of an extreme scientific approach, for the simple fact that these institutions *had no scientific approach*. In her fascinating book *The Master Plan*, Canadian journalist and author Heather Pringle explains that the Ahnenerbe pretended to use exact scientific methods but was in fact concerned with creating myths: “Its prominent researchers devoted themselves to distorting the truth and churning out carefully tailored evidence to support the ideas of Adolf Hitler,” writes Pringle. “Some scholars twisted their findings consciously; others warped them without thought, unaware that their political views drastically shaped their research. But all proved adept at this manipulation.”²⁰ The institute’s first president, historian and philologist Herman Wirth, went as far as proclaiming in one of his lectures that “the time has now passed... when science believed its task was to search for the truth, such as it is. Now the task of science is to proceed with its prophecy, to awaken.”²¹ Not surprisingly, Nazi biological racism was far from conducive to serious scientific research. Any finding that did not coincide with the regime’s ideology was censored and concealed, whereas every notion that fit the official line—baseless and fraudulent though it may be—was investigated. In his voluminous study *The Third Reich: A New History*, historian Michael Burleigh notes:

The “science” supporting eugenic policies was mostly a matter of faith, as was evident when ethically aware and responsible scientists used conventional scientific reasoning to question the eugenicists’ zealously held pseudo-scientific assumptions.... There was also nothing specifically scientific in the enthusiasm some eugenicists, and for that matter Hitler, evinced for the alleged practices of ancient or primitive societies such as the Spartans, but this does not lead to wholesale condemnation of classics. “Modern” humanitarianism was routinely castigated for the problems of the present, and for long-term ruin allegedly facing the racial collective if it ignored

the primordial dictates of nature. The links between this strange mix and modern science are by no means self-evident.²²

As Burleigh is careful to stress, the ultimate answer to the charlatanic theories advanced by the Nazi regime was to be found in science itself—objective, rational, and impartial.²³ Credible scientific research exposed the falsifications, contradictions, and lies that fed the utopian eugenics vision and the preposterous myths propagated by Hitler and his minions. The confrontation between “traditional science” and “Nazi science” was never a struggle between two opposite and competing “narratives”—to use the fashionable postmodern jargon—but rather a clash between an uncompromising quest for truth and an unreserved surrender to falsehood.

The attempt to blame modern science for the crimes of the Nazis adds insult to injury, for it ignores the considerable contribution of science to humanitarian causes. Foucault and Peukert vehemently condemn the hygienic obsessions that paved the way to the Final Solution, but they never bother to mention the many scientific and technological accomplishments that served the very populations the Nazis’ racist ideology sought to eliminate. Modern medicine and biology have prolonged the life of the sick and the elderly, brought relief to the handicapped, battled hereditary diseases, purified drinking water in developing countries, and vanquished malaria and cholera—just for starters.²⁴ Hundreds of millions of people who would have been sentenced to sterilization or death by Nazi policy owe their lives to science—and to the countless *petit bourgeois* who practiced it. Only those hopelessly corrupted by the radical dogmas that run rampant in today’s humanities departments could classify this momentous humanitarian contribution as merely another calculated demonstration of “bio-power.”

“The Nazis’ mass murder of the European Jews,” writes historian Christopher Browning, “was not only the technological achievement of an industrial society, but also the organizational achievement of a

bureaucratic society.”²⁵ The Third Reich’s death machine was indeed built on a colossal administrative system, one designed to manage all stages and organizational aspects of the extermination process, from the Jews’ concentration and isolation to the disposal of their remains and property. According to certain scholars, this bureaucratic dimension of the Final Solution is conclusive evidence of the Holocaust’s modern nature; moreover, they claim, it is an expression of the anti-humanist nature of modernity itself, taken by the Nazis to its logical extreme.

The discussion on the central place of bureaucracy in modern, industrialized society was launched by Max Weber, one of the founding fathers of sociology. Weber saw bureaucracy as an embodiment of the rationalization process that allows for a systematic, efficient, regulated, and calculated organization of the many aspects of modern life. In such a world, he wrote in 1920, “instrumental action” (*zweckrational*), which seeks to assign optimal means to goals, takes precedence over behavior governed by traditions, values, and emotions. Bureaucracy, in which instrumental action finds its pure expression, has become a central element of the modern state, an organizational method “completely indispensable” for the needs of contemporary mass administration.²⁶ Weber recognized the supreme efficiency of this system, but at the same time argued that it imprisoned the individual in an “iron cage of rationality” and deprived him of his humanity: “No machinery in the world functions so precisely as this apparatus of men and, moreover, so cheaply.... Rational calculation... reduces every worker to a cog in this [bureaucratic] machine and, seeing himself in this light, he will merely ask how to transform himself from a little into a somewhat bigger cog.... The passion for bureaucratization at this meeting drives us to despair.”²⁷

Weber’s approach to the modern world was clear-headed and critical, yet not even he could have imagined the active role bureaucracy would play in the systematic murder of millions. The contribution of the administrative system to the Nazi regime was first discussed by the German legal and political theorist Franz Neumann in his book *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*.²⁸ But it was his student, Austrian-born

historian Raul Hilberg, who exposed the full scope of the complex, elaborate, and meticulous bureaucracy that was involved in each and every stage of the Final Solution. In his monumental study *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Hilberg drew on a wealth of previously untouched archival material to turn the spotlight away from the Nazi leadership and onto the vast organization beneath it.²⁹ Hilberg described the Third Reich's mass-murder operation as "an administrative process carried out by bureaucrats in a network of offices spanning a continent."³⁰ This process was not run in a centralized or premeditated manner; rather, the bureaucracy that dealt with the Jewish problem "had no master plan, no fundamental blueprint, no clear-cut view of its actions."³¹ Nevertheless, it advanced steadily and gradually—its measures becoming more and more extreme—toward the Final Solution. What ultimately led to Auschwitz, explained Hilberg, was the dynamic, sometimes chaotic, *modus operandi* of a system charged with the disposal of a certain group of people (the Jews) and forced to devise effective solutions to the many challenges and difficulties along the way. This argument was subsequently adopted by the functionalist school of Holocaust studies, which believes—contrary to the intentionalist position—that the annihilation of European Jewry was the product not of a monstrous ideological agenda, but of the "twisting road" taken by Nazi executives and executors of all ranks.³²

Hilberg's work also influenced Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Contrary to the cautious historian who prefers to discuss the "hows" instead of the "whys," Bauman does not shy away from far-reaching statements. His work is a long and eloquent indictment of modernity, which he sees as the birth-mother of Nazism. The Holocaust, Bauman writes, "did not just, mysteriously, avoid clash with the social norms and institutions of modernity. It was these norms and institutions that made the Holocaust feasible."³³ Only an industrialized society, governed by instrumental rationality, could have executed such a diabolical plan in so methodical a manner: "Modern civilization was not the Holocaust's sufficient condition; it was, however, most certainly its *necessary* condition. Without it, the Holocaust would be

unthinkable. It was the rational world of modern civilization that made the Holocaust thinkable.”³⁴

The Nazis, maintains Bauman, may not have invented genocide—history has witnessed quite a few exterminations of entire peoples—but they did give it a distinctly modern character. What separates modern genocide from previous forms of mass murder is the fact that it has a specific objective, namely, serving “a grand vision of a better, and radically different, society.”³⁵ The racist social engineering that the Nazis took up so zealously is also an innovation of the modern age: It reflects the desire, nurtured by Western culture since the days of the Enlightenment, to “remake the society, force it to conform to an overall, scientifically conceived plan.”³⁶

To translate this megalomaniacal ambition into practical terms, the Nazis required another modern invention: bureaucracy. Racism, emphasizes Bauman, is “a policy first, ideology second. Like all politics, it needs organization, managers and experts.”³⁷ Like Hilberg and other functionalists, Bauman believes that the extermination was not deliberately planned by Nazi leadership, but “cooked up” by administrators, after all the other ways of expelling the Jews from the Third Reich either were exhausted or had reached a dead end:

The most shattering of lessons deriving from the analysis of the “twisted road to Auschwitz” is that—in the last resort—*the choice of physical extermination as the right means to the task of Entfernung was a product of routine bureaucratic procedures: means-end calculus, budget balancing, universal rule application. To make the point sharper still the choice was an effect of the earnest effort to find rational solutions to successive “problems,” as they arose in the changing circumstances.... The “Final Solution” did not clash at any stage with the rational pursuit of efficient, optimal goal-implementation. On the contrary, it arose out of a genuinely rational concern, and it was generated by bureaucracy true to its form and purpose.*³⁸

It is to the typical workings of the bureaucratic apparatus that Bauman points in response to the question of how so many people—for the most

part normative individuals—could have been willing accomplices in mass murder. The answer, he argues, lies in the distribution of administrative work. By distancing the perpetrators of destruction from its results, the criminals from the victims, the hierarchical structure of the managerial system served as a moral desensitizer: “What such practical and mental distance from the final product means is that most functionaries of the bureaucratic hierarchy may give commands without full knowledge of their effects. In many cases they would find it difficult to visualize those effects.”³⁹ Moreover, bureaucracy’s tendency to address its subjects in abstract terms—as numbers on a page, a graph curve, or sections of a pie chart—denied the victims their humanity, thereby facilitating their extermination.⁴⁰ “The overall conclusion,” writes Bauman,

is that the bureaucratic mode of action, as it has been developed in the course of the modernizing process, contains all the technical elements which proved necessary in the execution of genocidal tasks. This mode can be put to the service of a genocidal objective without major revision of its structure, mechanisms and behavioral norms.⁴¹

Bauman’s diagnosis leaves no room for doubt: The origin of the Final Solution lies not in the hatred of Jews or any other aspect of Nazi ideology, but in the very essence of modern society. And, since the rational bureaucratic model responsible for the Holocaust has only grown stronger and more established since World War II, one cannot discount the possibility of the atrocities’ recurrence. As Bauman admonishes, “none of the societal conditions that made Auschwitz possible truly disappeared, and no effective measures have been undertaken to prevent such possibilities and principles from generating Auschwitz-like catastrophes.”⁴²

Bauman’s choice of presenting instrumental rationality as the main, if not only, driving force behind the German murder industry lends his work a sensationalist appeal, but it is also its great weakness. The most significant flaw in Bauman’s analysis is his underestimation of the central role of the Nazi worldview in the Final Solution. After all, as Israeli Holocaust scholar Yehuda

Bauer argues, this ideology not only gave rise to the extermination process, but constantly drove it toward completion—in spite, and not because, of the involvement of an instrumentally governed administrative system:

From Bauman's description one would assume that the German bureaucratic machinery was efficient and "modern." It wasn't. It often was a fumbling, ineffective, contradiction-ridden machine, where each fiefdom in the Nazi state had its own interests and fought against everyone else to preserve them... the unique efficiency they showed in destroying the Jews, often for pseudo-pragmatic reasons, really showed the remarkable impact of ideology on them.⁴³

Thus, contrary to Bauman's conclusion that Nazi racism was "policy first, ideology second," the leaders of the Third Reich made it clear to their subordinates that their commitment to the regime's antisemitic vision must override any rational consideration, including even the preservation of the German state.⁴⁴ In 1941, when the Reichskommissar Heinrich Lohse asked Alfred Rosenberg, the chief ideologue of the Nazi party, if it was necessary to exterminate all the Jews in the East "without taking economic interests into consideration, Wehrmacht needs for skilled workers in the arms industry, for example," Rosenberg replied that "In principle, no economic consideration whatever will be taken into account in the solution of this problem."⁴⁵ Israeli historian Saul Friedländer, who recounts this anecdote, notes that "the persecution and massacre of Europe's Jews did away with a sizeable work force at a times when the Nazi Reich was engaged in the most desperate phases of total war.... According to the statistics, the Final Solution was a loss to the German war economy for which the wealth taken from the victims was no compensation."⁴⁶

It is impossible to understand so destructive a policy without recognizing that Nazi ideology was, for the most part, not only irrational—but anti-rational. It cherished the pagan, pre-Christian past of the German nation, adopted romantic ideas of a return to nature and a more "organic" existence, and nurtured an apocalyptic expectation of an end of days, whence the

eternal struggle between the races would be resolved. “Nazism is anchored to a relentless quasi-scientific, impersonal determinism and is at the same time shrouded in Teuton-Wagnerian vapors of myth and legend, and haunted by an all-damning fatalism,” wrote eminent Israeli scholar Jacob Talmon.⁴⁷ The contempt for rationalism and its association with the despised Enlightenment stood at the core of Nazi thought; the movement’s ideologues emphasized the contradiction between *weltanschauung* (“worldview”), the natural and direct experience of the world, and *welt-an-denken* (“thinking about the world”), the “destructive” intellectual activity that breaks reality down through conceptualization, calculation, and theorization.⁴⁸ Against the “degenerate” liberal bourgeois’ worship of reason, the Nazis championed the idea of a vital, spontaneous life, unhindered and undimmed by compromises or dilemmas.

The brave new world the Nazis envisaged could not have tolerated the presence of the Jew, a parasitic and infectious life form. Antisemitism was not just another aspect of Hitler’s vision, but a founding dogma, an obsession that poisoned an entire nation and drove its leader obsessively until his very last moments. True, the racism and passionate hatred of Jews did in fact enlist the services of administrators and technicians—in many ways “normal” people—yet they were never lost in the maze of bureaucratic procedures and cost-effective calculations. They were a permanent factor, an uncompromising motivation, a Dionysian power behind an Apollonian apparatus.⁴⁹

Bauman and other critics of modernity attach only marginal importance to the irrationality of Nazi antisemitism, eager as they are to broaden the target of their postmodern arrows. However, in their haste to cast the blame for the crimes of the Third Reich on Western civilization at large, they create a biased, erroneous historiography. Such a narrative denies the possibility of understanding the Holocaust and gleaning from it actual lessons for the future. It is not only an intellectual insult; it is also an affront to morality.

Criticism of modernity, of course, has its place. It is necessary, and often not incorrect. However, in order to separate the wheat from the chaff, the legitimate claims from the baseless attacks that repeatedly evoke the Nazi demon, it is important to understand what modernity had actually promised, and what it could not deliver; which of the hopes it inspired were unrealistic from the outset; and, perhaps most important, whether the atrocities committed by the Third Reich consign it to complete failure. These are difficult questions, and deserve in-depth answers. We will have to make do, however, with a few preliminary thoughts.

The term “modernity,” recurring throughout this essay, has meant various things since its first appearance in the late fifth century. The term usually denotes a particular worldview, a kind of consciousness that perceives the present, or near future, as a dramatic innovation in comparison to the past. In a historical and sociological context, the term designates the era that began after the Middle Ages; more specifically, it refers to the processes of secularization, industrialization, urbanization, and bureaucratization that have transformed Western society over the last few hundred years. Intellectually, however, what is known as the “project of modernity” is primarily identified with the European Enlightenment and its desire to liberate humanity from the fetters of prejudice and ancient custom, thus creating a new, reformed order under the rule of reason. Unprecedented scientific progress, the rational investigation of politics and ethics, and new artistic experimentations—all these convinced the denizens of the West in the 1700s that man would finally emerge, in the words of Immanuel Kant, “from his self-incurred immaturity.”⁵⁰

The disillusionment began long before the Holocaust. The promise of a new world, in which humanity would utilize its scientific knowledge and technological prowess to cure its physical and spiritual ailments, was shattered in the senseless mass slaughter of World War I. The disappointment and despair that prevailed in its aftermath found voice in the words of Martin Heidegger’s teacher, the German Jewish philosopher Edmund

Husserl, in his work *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*:

The exclusiveness with which the total world-view of modern man, in the second half of the nineteenth century, let itself be determined by the positive sciences and be blinded by the “prosperity” they produced, meant an indifferent turning-away from the questions which are decisive for a genuine humanity. Merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people. The change in public evaluation was unavoidable, especially after the war, and we know that it has gradually become a feeling of hostility among the younger generation. In our vital need—so we are told—this science has nothing to say to us. It excludes in principle precisely the questions which man, given over in our unhappy times to the most portentous upheavals, finds the most burning: questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of this human existence.... But can the world, and human existence in it, truthfully have a meaning if the sciences recognize as true only what is objectively established in this fashion, and if history has nothing more to teach us than that all the shapes of the spiritual world, all the conditions of life, ideals, norms upon which man relies, form and dissolve themselves like fleeting waves, that it always was and ever will be so, that again and again reason must turn into nonsense, and well-being into misery? Can we console ourselves with that? Can we live in this world, where historical occurrence is nothing but an unending concatenation of illusory progress and bitter disappointment?⁵¹

The bitter realization that reason—and its offspring, science—did not bring about the anticipated salvation or provide answers to the burning questions that occupied man, but rather abandoned him to a world of “illusory progress and bitter disappointment,” runs through the critical thought of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, two leading representatives of the Frankfurt school. Yet Adorno and Horkheimer went even further than Husserl, accusing modernity of not only impotence, but also actual fraud. In their classic *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published in 1947, they presented the history of reason as a continuous struggle for dominance dating back to

the early days of antiquity. Man's alleged liberation from the yoke of the ancient mythical worldview made way for the new mythology of the Enlightenment and the enslavement it cunningly perpetuates under the guise of freedom. Instead of promoting critical and reflective thought, they argued, modernity has subjugated the masses to the avaricious and vain authority of instrumental rationality:

The technical process, into which the subject has objectified itself after being removed from the consciousness, is free of the ambiguity of mythic thought as of all meaning altogether, because reason itself has become the mere instrument of the all-inclusive economic apparatus. It serves as a general tool, useful for the manufacture of all other tools, firmly directed toward its end, as fateful as the precisely calculated movement of material production, whose result for mankind is beyond all calculation. At last its old ambition, to be a pure organ of ends, has been realized.⁵²

Under the inspiration of Horkheimer and Adorno, resistance to the absolute rule of instrumental rationality has become a central motif in the critique of modern society. Turning their back on the "meta-narrative" of progress, philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Bauman have followed the Frankfurt school in arguing that modernity is not an emancipatory force but an oppressive order, and that there is no greater evidence of the illusion on which it is based than the success of the market economy. "The victory of capitalist technoscience over the other candidates for the universal finality of human history is another means of destroying the project of modernity while giving the impression of completing it," wrote Lyotard. "The subject's mastery over the objects generated by contemporary science and technology does not bring greater freedom, more public education or greater wealth more evenly distributed."⁵³

Clearly, these objections imply a bitter sense of disappointment with the ignominious failure of Marxism in all its forms, a disappointment that the radical criticisms of the Enlightenment and its legacy cannot seem to overcome. While the beginning of the twentieth century saw modernity

progressing down two main paths—one of the liberal bourgeois ethos and the other of socialist utopianism—the total and utter collapse of the latter left the end of the century with only one rational social possibility. For radical left-wing intellectuals, including many who were disenchanted by the fall of secular Marxist messianism (notably Bauman and Lyotard), this situation is insufferable. In their view, capitalism was and remains a corrupt and corrupting system, possibly the worst system of all. If it succeeded in winning the ideological, political, and economic war against egalitarianism, they concluded, there must be something fundamentally wrong with modernity, the Enlightenment, and the Western tradition at large. The only answer to the growing power of evil, according to these thinkers, is the development of a criticism no longer grounded in objectivity and rationality, but predicated instead on an abstract ideal of “resistance” to the status quo.⁵⁴

Radical thought’s recurrent use of the word “Auschwitz” as a code for the sins of modernity gave rise to a series of attempts to bind the Holocaust together with the ills of Western consumerism.⁵⁵ George Ritzer, for example, a well-known sociologist at the University of Maryland, sees much in common between the Nazi death camps and the fast-food chain McDonald’s. Ritzer, a staunch critic of global capitalism, condemns what he calls “the McDonaldization of society,” which prizes quantity over quality and destroys mankind in the name of efficiency and inhuman technology.⁵⁶ From there, the road connecting Auschwitz’s gas chambers to the greasy frying pan is not very long:

To many it will seem obscene to discuss fast-food restaurants and the Holocaust in the same context. Yet, there is a clear line in sociological thinking about modern rationality from the bureaucracy to the Holocaust and then to the fast-food restaurant. Weber’s principles of rationality can be applied usefully and meaningfully to each. The perpetrators of the Holocaust employed the bureaucracy as one of their major tools. The conditions that made the Holocaust possible, especially the formally rational system,

continue to exist today. Indeed, what the process of McDonaldization indicates is not only that formally rational systems persist, but that they are expanding dramatically.⁵⁷

This observation, it bears mentioning, appears in a standard textbook for students of social sciences—showing how easily radical discourse is allowed to stray from the limits of decency and common sense. The sweeping generalizations of the Holocaust-modernity equation allow academics and social activists seeking provocation to portray liberal democracies as no better than totalitarian tyrants, and to brand as “Nazi” anything with a semblance of rational management—especially if it is part of the detested corporate capitalism.⁵⁸

Naturally, exaggerations and distortions of this kind do not render criticism of modernity in general and the Enlightenment in particular illegitimate. Such critiques certainly have their grounds. Who can deny that the great hopes for a secular redemption of humankind were dashed? Who truly believes that science alone can give our lives ultimate meaning? Life in modern society is very far from the ideals envisioned by eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers or nineteenth-century positivists. Political, economic, and social exploitation are still realities to be reckoned with, exacerbated by the new miseries of loneliness, alienation, depression, cynicism, and apathy.

Still, the “project of modernity” is by no means a failure. In many ways, it is an overwhelming success. True, science could not satisfy metaphysical yearning or spiritual thirst—but has it ever presumed to do so? It has broadened the horizons of humanity, enhanced its confidence in itself, granted it protection (albeit not completely) against natural disasters, and empowered it to make use of its surroundings (and improve and repair them where necessary). Reason did not fill the void in man’s soul or bring him paradise, but it *did* endow him with the ability to distinguish truth from error, well-founded theories from delusions, fancies, and fallacies. The value of these

capacities is momentous. Whether or not one uses them well is a choice human beings must make, and they must bear responsibility for the results.

Radical thinkers would have us believe that the worship of instrumental reason has tainted liberal-bourgeois society. But it is these societies, imperfect though they may be, that harbor many of the conditions that allow for the cultivation of “essential” rationality: They are open, encourage a free exchange of information and ideas, and demonstrate a readiness—if not actual eagerness—for self-criticism. And although they are at times fertile ground for outlandishly radical philosophies, the harm caused by such views is limited compared to the damage wrought by the dogmatic ideologies of authoritarian regimes.

Modernity is not infallible; it is not immune to the mass outbursts of fanaticism, rage, and hatred that may plague even the most progressive of nations. National Socialism’s road to power and the heinous crimes it committed demonstrate this clearly. Yet the most effective antidote to extremism and evil (of which the Third Reich was but one contemporary example) still lies in enlightened thinking, rational judgment, and loyalty to the noble moral values the West has so long fought to impart to the world.

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Notes

1. Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 554.
2. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Neither an Accident Nor a Mistake," *Critical Inquiry* 15:2 (Winter 1989), p. 484.
3. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), p. 17.
4. Richard Rubenstein, "Modernization and the Politics of Extermination," in Michael Berenbaum, ed., *A Mosaic of Victims: Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis* (New York: New York University, 1990), p. 20.
5. Adi Ophir, *The Order of Evils: Toward an Ontology of Morals* (New York: Zone, 2005), pp. 555-556.
6. Robert Proctor, *The Nazi War on Cancer* (Princeton: Princeton, 1999), p. 16. Proctor devotes his book to the study of cancer research in Germany, which was not only highly developed (German physicians, for example, were the first to prove the connection between smoking and lung cancer), but also led to preventative legislation and enforcement that some would consider advanced even by today's standards.
7. Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, *The Note-Books of Anton Chekhov*, trans. Samuel Solomonovich Koteliansky and Leonard Woolf (New York: Huebsch, 1921), p. 4. Emphasis added.
8. Heather Pringle, *The Master Plan, Himmler's Scholars and the Holocaust* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006).
9. Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), pp. 345-404.
10. Elof Axel Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea* (New York: Cold Spring Harbor, 2001).
11. Michel Foucault, "Sade: Sargeant of Sex," in Sylvère Lotringer, ed., *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews 1961-1984* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), p. 188.
12. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1999), p. 138.
13. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 139.
14. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 139.
15. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 137.

16. Detlev J.K. Peukert, "The Genesis of the 'Final Solution' from the Spirit of Science," in Thomas Childers and Jane Caplan, eds., *Reevaluating the Third Reich* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1993), pp. 234-252.

17. Peukert, "Genesis of the 'Final Solution,'" p. 236.

18. Peukert, "Genesis of the 'Final Solution,'" p. 247.

19. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge: MIT, 1985), p. 15.

20. Pringle, *Master Plan*, p. 3.

21. Pringle, *Master Plan*, pp. 56-57.

22. Burleigh, *Third Reich*, p. 348.

23. The very claim that science aspires—or ought to aspire—to ideological objectivity has elicited strong opposition from the proponents of postmodernism. According to Zygmunt Bauman, for example, science's disengagement from the "normative pressures" of ethics and religion made it morally deaf and dumb, as well as responsible for the Final Solution. Bauman seems to forget that "Nazi science" was not stripped of beliefs and values. On the contrary, it was absolutely committed to Hitler's vision, which is exactly why it erred so grossly. See Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 108.

24. Historian Michael Burleigh's indignation in the face of Peukert's arguments is understandable: "On what kind of 'science' is this pretentious drivel based?" he thunders. "The science that explains the origin of the universe and its maker, the climatic changes on the sun's surface, the science that to a large extent eradicated cholera and malaria and purified the water in Asia and Africa?" Michael Burleigh, *Ethics and Extermination: Reflections on Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1997), p. 180.

25. Christopher Browning, "The German Bureaucracy and the Holocaust," in Alex Grobman and Daniel Landes, eds., *Genocide: Critical Issues of the Holocaust* (Los Angeles: Simon Wiesenthal Center, 1983), p. 148.

26. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M. Henerson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Free Press, 1966), p. 338.

27. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, trans. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, vol. 1 (Totowa, N.J.: Bedminster, 1968), p. liii.

28. Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford, 1942).

29. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, revised ed. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985).

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30. Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, vol. 1, p. ix.
31. Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, vol. 3, p. 998.
32. The terms “functionalism” and “intentionalism” in regards to the Holocaust were coined in 1981 by the British Marxist historian Tim Mason. See Tim Mason, “Intention and Explanation: A Current Controversy About the Interpretation of National Socialism,” in Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker, eds., *The Fahrerstaat: Myth and Reality* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), pp. 21-40 [German]. For an edifying description of the debate between the two schools of thought, see Boaz Neumann, *Nazism* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2007), pp. 150-179 [Hebrew].
33. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 87.
34. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 13.
35. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 91.
36. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 91.
37. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 74.
38. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 17. Emphasis in the original.
39. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 99.
40. This description, not coincidentally, evokes Hannah Arendt’s controversial claim that “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied—as had been said at Nuremberg over and over again by the defendants and their counsels—that this new type of criminal, who is in actual fact *hostis generis humani*, commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong.” See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1965), p. 276.
41. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 104.
42. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 11.
43. Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale, 2002), p. 78.
44. Some try to present the very plan of annihilating the Jews as rational. Historians Götz Aly and Suzanne Heim argue that the extermination policy was informed not by racial ideology, but by purely economic considerations: the maximization of the Third Reich’s productive capabilities by getting rid of populations regarded by Nazi technocrats as “excess baggage.” See Götz Aly and Suzanne Heim,
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“The Holocaust and Population Policy: Remarks on the Decision on the ‘Final Solution,’” *Yad Vashem Studies* 24 (1995), pp. 33-53 [Hebrew]. For an exhaustive and thorough criticism of Götz’s and Heim’s position, see Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, pp. 96-98, and Dan Diner, *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000), ch. 6, pp. 138-159.

45. Saul Friedländer, *Reflection of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, trans. Thomas Weyr (New York: Avon, 1984), p. 75. For additional examples of the sacrifice of rational interest for the sake of the Final Solution, see David Bankier, “Modernization and the Rationality of Extermination,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 24 (1995), pp. 109-131.

46. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, p. 74.

47. Jacob L. Talmon, *Myth of the Nation and Vision of Revolution: Ideological Polarization in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981), p. 527.

48. Boaz Neumann, *Nazi Weltanschauung—Space, Body, Language* (Tel Aviv: Haifa University and Sifriat Maariv, 2002), pp. 29-30 [Hebrew].

49. Boaz Neumann touches on this when he points out the limitations of the functionalist approach in Holocaust studies: “Functionalist historians describe the unfolding of events concerning the Jewish problem as largely arbitrary and random. They do not, however, consider the fact that even if this is a course of trial and error, or a circumstantial process determined by improvisation—the Nazi-German motivation to solve the Jewish problem remains a constant throughout the story.... Functionalist historians certainly present the casual element of the narrative well, yet they fail to connect the dots between one attempted solution and another. Despite the arbitrariness and improvisation, there is an underlying ‘desire’ at work.” Neumann, *Nazi Weltanschauung*, pp. 177-178.

50. Immanuel Kant, “Answering the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” *Berlin Monthly* (December 1784).

51. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern, 1970), pp. 5-7.

52. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 30.

53. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982-1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1992), p. 18.

54. Frederick Crews, *Skeptical Engagements* (New York: Oxford, 1986), pp. 138-139.

55. In the words of Lyotard: “Auschwitz’ can be taken as a paradigmatic name for the tragic ‘incompletion’ of modernity.” See Lyotard, *Postmodern Explained*, p. 18.

56. George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge, 1993).

57. George Ritzer, *Sociological Theory*, fourth ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), pp. 582-583. Ironically, Ritzer’s argument echoes an infamous claim made by Martin Heidegger, who was a member of the Nazi party and served it loyally (if unsuccessfully) as the rector of Freiburg University in 1933-1934. During a lecture he gave on December 1, 1949, Heidegger—an influential critic of technology—attacked modern agriculture for turning into a “motorized-food-industry,” insisting that it is “in essence, the same as the manufacturing of corpses in gas chambers and extermination camps, the same as the blockading and starving of nations, the same as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs.” See Victor Farías, *Heidegger and Nazism*, trans. Paul Burrell and Gabriel Ricci (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1989), p. 287.

58. In a similar vein, the prominent thinker Giorgio Agamben could argue that “the camp... is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West.” Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford, 1998), p. 181.