

Compassion and Cruelty in Modern Society

The Case of the Holocaust

Introduction: Goldhagen and sociology

The publication in 1996 of Daniel Goldhagen's *Ordinary Germans: Hitler's Willing Executioners* stirred fierce debate among both Holocaust historians and the general public as well. For the most part, sociologists ignored this debate, even though Goldhagen provides what could be a stepping off point for a sociological reflection on the Holocaust.

Goldhagen's primary goal in his book is mainly to establish a phenomenology of cruelty. His descriptions of German cruelty are vivid and he clearly struggles to keep his distance. Goldhagen attempts to understand the Germans in the best Weberian/Diltheyan tradition, by providing a 'thick description' (Bartov 1997). Yet one senses his raw underlying queries: What was the meaning of it all? Why were they so cruel? Why, when it made no 'utilitarian' sense anymore, was it still 'wertrational' to keep on killing and not only killing, but torturing, maiming, sadistically enjoying the pleasures of cruelty? Goldhagen says in the preface that if he could, he would take every single instance of the six million murders and would try to understand what prompted each one. He asks questions no historian would ask. When the Germans were leading Jews into the forest to execute them, each soldier walking next to a victim, he draws parallels between the walks fathers must have made with their children in the German forests; saying surely some of these recollections came to the minds of these soldiers. What made them do it? What could possibly go through the mind of a German who puts a machine gun in the hands of a ten year old child and forces him to kill his parents? Goldhagen talks about the death marches after the Allies disembarked, the fact that the Germans could have run but did not, but forced Jews to their deaths. Goldhagen does not accept 'obedience to authority' as a framework for understanding. Neither does he embrace the thesis developed by Hannah Arendt that totalitarianism destroys the public sphere, language, interest, and moral capacity. On the contrary, he considers the Germans to have been morally aware, morally autonomous, voluntarily cruel. He claims that Nazi Germa-

ny was simultaneously dictatorial and consensual. Furthermore, he argues that the Germans were differentially affected by the Enlightenment in Europe, and that their national self-identity was defined and constituted in terms of the Jew. Goldhagen rejects any justifying label suggesting a momentary 'lapse' such as Nazis, SS, Wehrmacht etc. and simply calls them all 'Germans'.

The social scientist Zygmunt Bauman takes the opposite stance from Goldhagen on these same issues. He rejects the sociological theory of morality, claiming that morality is found in the heroic exceptions, not in the general rule. This is the equivalent of saying that morality should not be approached sociologically, but rather psychologically, and that the act and the individual, rather than the norm and the rule, are the unit of analysis.

Goldhagen, however takes a new approach to an old argument about the uniqueness of the Holocaust. The classic argument holds that every evil act - regardless of type - must have an explanation, because human nature is inherently good. People tend to find Goldhagen's explanation so unsatisfying because of the book's obvious conclusions: Germans had evil beliefs; they believed Jews were evil, in the same way that cockroaches are an 'evil'. Hence their behavior was fundamentally un-sociological because a belief motivated an action rather than the other way around. The issue at stake from this point of view is that German behavior cannot be explained sociologically, which is the modern way of saying that their behavior cannot be explained, unless the theory is abandoned and the Germans are qualified as evil by nature. This leads us to another issue, namely the way Goldhagen defines the relationship between evil and social theory, since apparently evil dwells where our (inherent-good of mankind) social theory does not apply.

Towards a sociology of the holocaust: compassion

Given this sociological stumbling block, is a sociology of the Holocaust possible? Can there be a sociological explanation why one group was selected for extermination by another in the cruelest of ways possible? No definitive answer is available, and this article is simply a modest attempt to think sociologically about the Holocaust, using 'compassion' or the lack of 'compassion' as the key concepts. Similar to De Swaan's (1997) recent query as to how 'dis-identification' was possible, we can reformulate to ask how factories of death could have been constructed as the German Nazis did.

There are two broad sociological interpretations of the Holocaust. The first approaches the Holocaust in terms of modernity, and the second in terms of national history. The national history interpretation can be seen as a precursor to cultural studies that highlight rather than play down the differences in national cultures and the way in which they have arisen from their specific histories. These two frameworks are not mutually exclusive. The modernity approach has given rise to a cultural analysis as well, which tends however to focus on similarities across countries. It treats exceptions as exceptions rather than differences that could change over the course of time while remaining different.

The modernity interpretation can however be reconciled with the cultural studies tradition, or what can be termed the recent switch from 'society' to 'national cultures'. This type of theory makes the broad assumptions that there are things that can be said about society in general, there are crises that every society goes through, and there is, perhaps, a meaning to history. In the context of a sociological attempt to understand the Holocaust this implies inquiring how 'modernity,' the theory of the development of all national cultures, relates to the actual development of real national cultures.

To rephrase this assumption in term of the Holocaust, what do the questions that are raised about modernity and the Holocaust have to do with the 'actual meaning' of the Holocaust in actual countries? How should modernity be defined? Is modernity a kind of godless religion that gives meaning to life? Is it the latest in a long line of secular enlightenment religions, in which the Holocaust represents the ultimate challenge, the challenge of meaning? Or is it merely an abstraction deriving from the Eurocentric focus; namely, our belief that the events that occurred in the heart of Europe via the Germans were an action of the spirit, while what is happening in Rwanda because of the Hutus is just a sideshow? (De Swaan 1997).

The Holocaust can be interpreted in the framework of modernity in general, or it can be examined in the concrete context of the national cultures of those countries where it arose (see also Bartov 1996, 1997, 1998). There are two sides to modernity theory. It has been viewed as an indicator of the march of civilization (Elias 1939). Modernity theory posits that people become civilized through a money economy, i.e. capitalism. As Georg Simmel, (whose influence on Norbert Elias calls for further study) rightly argued in my opinion, money has always been a universal solvent that has replaced personal obligations with services purchased on the market, thereby freeing individuals from specific others by making them more dependent on society as a whole. However this substitution of one

large, unbreakable bond by a thousand little bonds is not imitation freedom. It is real freedom, the history of an increase in the individual's range of action. At the same time, the extension of the money economy tends to erode inequality through the same process of making people substitutable. It is hard to maintain the ideal of inequality - that some people are born to rule, and others born to serve - when people are functionally interchangeable. Money therefore tends to extend the concept of equality, in so far as the legitimacy of inequality is based upon a perception of essential differences in the person (see also Miller 1987 and Poggi 1993).

How does the rise of the money economy, and the fact that it fosters a specific kind of human relationship relate to the Holocaust? Simmel's thoughts in many ways parallel the concepts of anti-Semites of his time. The difference is that he was for what they were against. Both identified secularized Jews with commerce. Both Simmel and the anti-Semites saw Jews as the bearers of modernity. Naturally both thought modernity represented the collapse of tradition. In a nutshell, Simmel thought the modern world was positive, whereas anti-Semites thought it was the end of the world. Note that neither Simmel, nor the anti-Semites, were being unreasonable as regards identifying Jews with the intensification of commerce in the 19th century. Jews contributed to many innovations at the cutting edge of consumerism, both in finance and in retail. Jews dramatically modernized the retail trade, and helped to transform it from a place of useful goods into the department store, a gallery of dreams. These were the Arcades about which Benjamin wrote so extensively, and identified as the agora of the modern world. Anti-Semites saw the modernist, consumerist view as something alien, and denounced it as Jewish, rationalistic, individualistic and secular. The anti-Semites sought to remain in touch with deeper, spiritual, organic values - and above all, with the nation.

Counter-compassion: the hatred of the bourgeois

Hatred of the bourgeois and its spirit was clear in the works of German social thinkers such as Tönnies, Sombart and Scheler, and was often mixed with anti-Semitism as well. These writers denounced the modern world as a world of foreigners. Simmel characteristically reversed the idea, and defended foreignness as one of the most positive features of contemporary society. He thought indifference was a great cultural and historical achievement, and that foreignness made a positive contribution to the social order. If warrior society was held together by personal bonds and obligations, what holds a society of strangers together? People's first reaction in a

warrior society is to identify a newcomer as friend or enemy - and either way, the bonds of the in-group are strengthened. People's first reaction to a newcomer in *Gesellschaft* is to ignore him. What bonds can possibly grow out of this? Is not 'indifference' the polar opposite of citizenship, whose ideal is personified commitment? Rousseau is the modern source of this idea of citizenship:

The better constituted the state, the more public affairs outweigh private ones in the minds of the citizens. (...) In a well conducted city, everyone rushes to the assemblies. Under a bad government, no one cares to take even a step to attend them: no one takes an interest in what is done there, since it is predictable that the general will will not prevail, and so finally domestic concern absorbs everything (*Social Contract*, Book iii, ch. 15).

This is what we might call the classical theory of politics. It derives ultimately from the Greeks. Rousseau was the first to try to translate ideas suited to the polis - hence political ideas - into a form adapted to modern life. However he was by no means the last. The 20th century has seen many such attempts, starting most prominently perhaps with Rousseau's harshest critic, Hannah Arendt, who incidentally held Rousseau ultimately responsible for the Holocaust. This is again another link between the sociological ideas on modernity and the Holocaust. Yet Arendt agreed with Rousseau on this basic point that politics was something separate from, and opposed to, and in danger of being swallowed by, too much involvement in economic life. Habermas's influential early work (1962) posits a coffee-house public sphere in the golden age of capitalism that is progressively eaten away as 'late capitalism' develops. Communitarians such as Amitai Etzioni and Charles Taylor also see the market as something that erodes the shared project that makes fulfilling politics, and fulfilling lives, possible.

As brilliantly as these theorists twist and turn, there is something deeply antimodern about the classical theory of politics. The Greek notion of politics is different from the theory of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, because it does not idealize the (good) organic community and oppose it to the (bad) atomized individual. On the contrary, it celebrates the individual. It makes his/her individual cultivation the key to the health of the state, and it makes the healthy functioning of the state the key to the cultivation of the individual. Arendt tries to associate these approaches and in this way, she provides a link between theories of modernity and theories of national cultures, as follows:

History tells us that it is by no means a matter of course for the spectacle of misery to move men to pity; even during the long centuries when the Christian religion of mercy determined moral standards of Western civilization, compassion operated outside the political realm and frequently outside the established hierarchy of the Church (Arendt 1963, 65).

Arendt's objective is not to study the vicissitudes of compassion, but rather to demonstrate the inadequacy of compassion as a political principle and to argue that compassion and virtue are not necessarily identical (Canovan 1992). In other words, compassion and goodness are not the same. Her argument in *On Revolution* (1963) is a strong formulation against compassion as a political principle. At the same time, she is forced to acknowledge that its power is connected to the power of the 'social' versus the 'political'. Arendt opposed compassion as a political principle, but she realized that its theoretical source and origin are not in divine will and *agape*, but rather in an abstract and rational idea of humanity. The common good replaces salvation. This sense of shared humanity implies an equality, if not of status then of moral claim. Compassion requires the accomplishment of beneficent actions involving a certain kind of imaginative power to reconstruct others' conditions, an act of empathy implying a fundamental equality in human experience and moral status. In the history of ideas on moral conduct, compassion did not play a major role in pre-modern times. The classical moral traditions subordinated compassion to considerations of reason and prudence, whereas religious tradition distinguished very clearly between 'goodness in man' and 'goodness of God'. Neither in antiquity, nor in the Middle Ages was the 'man of feeling' ever popular (Crane 1934; Campbell 1987). Can the Holocaust, therefore, be defined as the complete breakdown of compassion, a reversal to barbarism, as Elias has argued?

Arendt was one of the first writers to attempt to understand the Holocaust sociologically and her ideas on modernity and compassion are related to her theorizing on the Holocaust. Her 1950 article 'Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps' provides the first clues. In this article, Arendt claims the concentration camps are beyond understanding, because most of our actions are of a utilitarian nature. Totalitarianism, or in this case, the camps, do not fit this utilitarianism, which prompted Arendt to point out that 'it was as though the Nazis were convinced that it was of greater importance to run extermination factories than to win the war'.

The source of Hannah Arendt's belief that modernity is haunted by evil is clearly the Holocaust. She is not alone in this; the attempt to explain

how such a horror could possibly occur in a modern society determined social theory for thirty years afterwards, and its effects are still felt today. We could simply throw out this complex theory as misguided by saying that Arendt and others made an exception into the rule. However, an exception that killed millions of people, that forced Europe to give up its empire, and that divided a continent and history itself into two is not the kind of exception one can ignore, especially when dealing with the theme of compassion. This is particularly true given that genocide is continually recurring, or threatening to recur; and that it bears the same relationship to late 20th century movements of compassion as the relationship of social questions in the early 19th century. If we refute Arendt's theory, we are left with the problem she hoped to solve. A theory that maintains that normalized compassion is a logical outgrowth of modernity needs to explain why such massive exceptions do not in fact negate our interpretation. If we do not in the end make the Holocaust the model for modernity, we still have to take it seriously as the most extreme case. Arendt continued her thoughts on the Holocaust in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). In all her thoughts on the Holocaust, the ambivalence between the above-mentioned frames of references remained. She did not want to relate to Nazism as a specific German phenomenon, and tried to connect to it the 'end of the political' or 'totalitarianism', but on the other hand she did not want to go as far as Adorno and Horkheimer in their 1947 *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. In Arendt's view, the Nazis and Eichmann with them represented the breakdown of the Enlightenment and democracy, critical judgment, and reason. Since she refused to consider compassion as a political force fostered by modernity, she did not relate to the Holocaust as a breakdown of modernity. Nothing is more identified with Arendt's views on the Holocaust than her concept of the 'banality of evil' attributed by her to Eichmann (Arendt 1963). It became a code-word for many misunderstandings and readings of Arendt and made her the target of criticism. It also became - against her will and intent, I would like to argue - the basis of a school of thought in the historiography of the Holocaust known as 'functionalism' (Mason 1973). This should not be confused with the sociological approach of the same name, even though they share some similarities. This particular school stresses impersonal forces, collective processes, bureaucratic forces and in the words of one of its leading proponents, Hans Mommsen (1991), 'cumulative radicalization', which stresses the fragmented decision making process of competing agencies within the Nazi regime. Anti-semitism plays a subordinated role in this approach in that the final solution is seen as the outcome of a bureaucratic process. Bauman's (1989) own sociological approach was

strongly influenced by this functionalist school. Furthermore, his studies (1993, 1995) in the morality of modern society argue that distance between people prevents all moral relations between them. In other words, the invisible other is turned into a morally lost other; there are no moral relations between strangers. Bauman puts forward an alternative of 'a-sociological' moral relations. These are relations based on an interpretation of E. Levinas' 'unconditional responsibility for the other' (see also Lash 1996). Arendt's thesis of the 'banality of evil' is also cited approvingly by Milgram (1973). His behaviorist interpretation of obedience posits that most people, if placed in a situation created by his laboratory setting, would act like many of his subjects did, i.e. administer painful electric shocks. Milgram is hence proposing another variant of the 'banality of evil' theory, and argues elsewhere that bureaucratization diminishes our sense of personal responsibility as claimed by Bauman. The American historian Christopher Browning (1992) in his *Ordinary People* (the title of his book prompted Goldhagen to choose his title of *Ordinary Germans*) attempted to translate Milgram's social psychology into a historical case study on the Holocaust. In his study of police reserve unit 101, which was responsible for the shooting of Jews in Poland, he comes to the conclusion that the Germanness of the perpetrators did not play a major role. He minimizes ideological motivation and stresses peer-pressure, the brutalizing effects of war, division of labor reducing personal responsibility and the universal potential of all people to turn into cruel, compassion-less mass killers.

In all these approaches, barbarism seems to be understood as one of the principles of modernity. The theories of the Frankfurt School, Hannah Arendt's ambivalence, Foucault's criticism of modern humanitarianism (1965, 1977) do not directly deal with the Holocaust, but rather with the oppressive nature of modern society. They set the sociological stage for a reading of the Holocaust as the disastrous potential of modern civilization and not as an aberration. Can there be an alternative? Could it be the other way around? Could there be a connection between modernity and humanitarianism, and not barbarism? Or rather could modernity actually foster compassion, and could the Holocaust be seen as the breakdown of compassion, i.e. the breakdown of modernity in its particular setting as the relationship, or lack of relationship (disidentification) between Germans and Jews?

Compassion and modernity

In this section, I examine the ways in which compassion can be part of modernity and how this can be related to a sociological understanding of the Holocaust. The relationship between 'humanitarianism' and the emergence of liberal society can be analyzed in terms of its distinctive features of capitalism (the market) and democracy (civic equality and citizenship). It is undeniable that 'humanitarianism' is associated with the rise of liberal society. Nevertheless, we must go beyond the purported inconsistency between liberal humanitarianism, and an image of the individualism and public indifference of liberal society. The sense of inconsistency between these two images of liberal democracy as a moral system is due in part to sentimentalism and nostalgia (for example, Nisbet 1962; Tönnies 1887), and in part to an image of liberal society as pervasively oppressive (for example, Foucault 1977). Both approaches suffer from the presentist assumption that moral sentiments such as compassion are 'more' or 'less' present in modern society (Sznaider 1998). Could there be a connection between market society and capitalism, and the rise of humanitarian sensibilities (Haskell 1985)? If market behavior consists of the relentless pursuit of profit, a capitalist 'moral cosmology' is impossible to deduce. Some have argued that the market depletes the moral legacy which it inherits. For instance, Joseph Schumpeter (1942) held that a social morality motivating concern for others is a legacy of the pre-capitalist and pre-industrial past. Schumpeter believed that capitalism, while a success as an economic system, would not avoid decline since it cannot produce a new code of morality without destroying what it has inherited. He saw a tragic 'contradiction' between the means necessary for capitalism's economic performance and the means needed for its cultural legitimization. In such views public compassion and humanitarian movements are incompatible with the self-interested rationality of market society, and are 'carry-over' effects from pre-capitalist eras or non-economic factors constraining the market.

Other critics of market society united by their sentimental longing for *gemeinschaftliche* solidarity (such as the young, romantic Marx and Ferdinand Tönnies) considered capitalism to lack ethical principles. The world of capitalism is devoid of tender feelings toward strangers, motivated solely by self-interest, and is cold and callous towards fellow human beings, seeing them only as instruments to one's own ends. In a typical statement the romantic Marx remarked:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has *pitilessly* torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless infeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade (Marx 1972, 475, my emphasis).

This statement expresses sensibilities representative of both conservative and romantic versions of the decline of community, and the dominance of calculative self-interest as crucial to the loss of brotherhood and compassion. Ferdinand Tönnies regarded the change from sacred-communal ideas to secular-associational ones as essential (Tönnies 1887, Nisbet 1966). The essence of market society is rationality and calculation. In this system, everybody is isolated, and no morality is possible. Adorno and Horkheimer also claim that the essence of 'compassion' is nothing other than the narcissistic desires of an exploitative bourgeoisie to feel good about itself (Horkheimer & Adorno 1944, 93). These ideas leave no room for the possibilities that modern society can develop any sense of moral responsibility. It also reduces market society to mere 'profit making'. However, market behaviour is not only about profit making. Does market society civilize behaviour as, among others, Elias (1978) and Hirschman (1982) have argued? Is there a form of compassion distinctive to market society, a bond among members of civil society that shapes encounters with the sufferings of others? Are the market and its behaviors and sensibilities necessarily detrimental to the emergence of public compassion? Contrary to clichés of 'Gesellschaft' perspectives as exemplified by Tönnies and others, market society might extend the scope of public compassion. By defining a universal field of others with whom contracts and exchanges can be made, market perspectives also extend the sphere of moral concern, however unintentionally (for example Gatrell 1994; Haskell 1985; Silver 1990). To demonstrate that public compassion and humanitarian sensibilities are indeed part of the moral universe of market society and capitalism, it is necessary to show that these historically specific forms of compassion differ from earlier ones. Eighteenth century British theorists of civil society such as Shaftesbury, Butler, Hutchinson, Hume and Smith developed a theory of 'moral sense' to address the problem of sympathy and compassion. 'Sympathy' is defined as a weak form of compassion. While compassion knows few limits, sympathy is conditional on others' appropriate behavior and is not withheld if others behave inappropriately. They

considered 'natural compassion' descriptive of human nature as well as normative (Hume 1751; Smith 1759). Human beings both possess and should show brotherly feelings for others. As an automatic mechanism for the common good, sympathy is thus seen to be part of the very nature of civil society. Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* begins by ascribing the source of concern for others in human nature:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner (Smith 1759, 9).

Smith assumes that 'we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others', and that it is 'a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it'. This 'natural' approach to understanding compassion is expressed by Hume in the observation that 'It is needless to push our researches so far as to ask, why we have humanity or a fellow-feeling with others. It is sufficient, that this is experienced to be a principle in human nature' (Hume 1751, 43).

In this view, *imagination* is key to compassion. Human beings are cruel because they cannot put themselves in the place of those who suffer. One has to imagine how one would feel in another's place. As Smith wrote:

(...) as we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations (Smith 1759, 9).

To experience 'natural' compassion, we must rely on our own senses. Compassion in this ethical system takes individualism and one's own experience of suffering as points of departure. Emotional separateness and distance, essential to individualism, are constitutive of brotherly feeling, as distinct from *agape* and *caritas*. Emotional separateness and distance, prevalent in market society, thus enable members of civil society to form a bond that shapes encounters with the suffering of others. Smith in particular emphasized the consistency between concern for the self and distance from others on the one hand, and the emergence of moral conduct

on the other. 'Sympathy' grows out of these separate experiences of individuals, and is therefore consistent with market society. Smith emphasizes the self-love of humankind in what he calls commercial society. People who were previously indifferent to each other can now enter into contractual market exchanges (Silver 1990). This kind of structural distance between individuals makes it possible to bring them together in a common public realm (Berry 1994; Boltanski 1993).

This sort of compassion is an unheroic quality, unlike the absolute goodness of saints. Self-love and compassion are intrinsically linked and co-exist within individuals (Mizuta 1975). The problem these thinkers attempted to solve was the relationship between self-interested individuals and benevolent or other-oriented moral conduct. This tension is particularly clear in Smith's two major works, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). That the same author wrote on political economy and moral sentiments, on self-interest and sympathy, seemed inconsistent to many, and is known as the *Das Adam Smith Problem*. The apparent 'problem' lies in the assumption that compassion and benevolence are inconsistent with market structures based on individual self-interest. However, the dependence of compassion on imagination and the individual self is crucial for the emergence of moral sentiments. Here Smith broke with the dominant tradition in moral philosophy that regarded communality, not distance, as key to brotherly feeling (Agnew 1986). Smith's concern was with the interpersonal behavior of civil society. Compassion thus originated in the mutual inaccessibility of individuals. One of the consequences of this view of compassion as 'benevolent sympathy' in nineteenth century reform policy was that it became conditional on the 'good' or 'appropriate' behavior of those who 'deserve' sympathy. As opposed to *agape*, which is unconditional and indifferent to the value of the one who is loved, compassion as 'benevolent sympathy' in the liberal setting is very much conditional on its being deserved.

As opposed to Tönnies and others in his tradition, Smith proposed a *Gesellschaft* of compassionate people. In the new market society, suffering is recreated imaginatively in the minds of public spectators. The existence of 'public imagination' is in itself, as Habermas (1963) has written, characteristic of market society. The public sphere is an arena for concerns important to all. The separation between the private and public spheres is also characterized by the emergence of a new religious conscience and the realization that it is impossible to impose morality through the official creed of the state or the official church. Therefore to experience compassion without transcending individualism, to imagine others' sufferings through a mechanism that informs us how we would suffer in the other's

place, we experience compassion best with people most like ourselves (Radner 1979).

Compassion played a formative role in the establishment of Western humanitarianism, and it was and still is presented as both normative and prescriptive. We are compassionate, and if we are not, we ought to be. Only in a democratic setting can compassion be almost substitutive for representation. Public compassion is not only an individual manifestation of human conduct and care for others. Such instances of human conduct occur everywhere and at all times. A sociology of public compassion addresses a social and collective pattern of conduct in which substantial numbers of people believe that to alleviate the sufferings, pains, and humiliations of others is the right thing to do. In this perspective, barbarism is the counter-principle of modernity.

The special path of german history – counter-compassion

In the historiography of National-Socialism this approach is called the *Sonderweg* (special path) of German history, i.e. the deviation of Germany from the civilizing path of modern, liberal societies. This shift, from people - and societies - that reveled and prided themselves on killing and torture, to societies that feel the pain of others so much that they have to hide or crusade against it - is essential. The 'special path' of German history was normatively part of the self-understanding of Western Germany after the war. Liberal intellectuals like Habermas (1995) wanted to disconnect Germany from its special path in history and connect it to a Western tradition of the Enlightenment. Sociologically, the analysis of Germany's special path can be traced back to a neglected essay by Veblen published in 1915. Here we encounter the reversal of Sombart's essay of the same year. Veblen described the German characteristics that in a later stage made Germany susceptible to Nazism and to the extra-ordinary cruelty of their conduct, stressing the special military and political character of Prussia in contrast to the liberal democratic character of England. This line of thought was later adopted by Parsons in his writings and radio addresses during World War II (Gerhardt 1992). His essay of 1942 *Democracy and Social Structure in Pre-Nazi Germany* is of special importance here, where he claims that the major difference between Germany and the Anglo-Saxon democracies must be understood in terms of Germany's interdependent feudal, militaristic, bureaucratic, and authoritarian features. Again, Prussia is key, since its ruling class consists of the landed nobility with families settled on ancestral estates. The 'Junker' life-style stands in sharp contrast

with the bourgeois, involving a strong contempt of industry and trade, liberal virtues, and even liberal and humane culture. Parsons also mentions the heroic ideal of the fighting man who could be propagandistically contrasted with the money grabbing capitalist. The National-Socialist movement hence mobilized the extremely deep-seated romantic tendencies of German society in the service of a violently aggressive political movement, incorporating a fundamentalist revolt against the trend towards rationalization in the Western world as a whole, and at the same time against its deepest institutionalized foundation. These were the specific features of pre-Nazi Germany which differentiated it from other Western countries. This Parsonian view of Germany was brought 'home' by the liberal German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf (1961). He also refers to the lack of 'economic individualism' in Germany prior to 1945 and celebrated Western Germany's path away from these special character traits to the family of bourgeois liberals. One could argue that these concepts were systematized in the work of Norbert Elias (1938, 1996).

Elias in his study on *The Germans*, points out that even at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the social status of rich bankers and merchants was significantly lower than the status of high civil servants and military men. The predominance of the duel in German society is a case in point. Elias talks about the bourgeoisified warrior ethos of Wilhelmine German society. This military ethos was also dominant in the industrial spheres of life. Many written testimonies make parallels between running a factory with the same military discipline as running an army camp. This may have not been typical of Germany alone, but it was doubtless hegemonic there. These tensions between the local/regional and the national produced one of the most significant peculiarities of German nationalism - the concept of the *Heimat*. Similar to the notion of the *Volk*, to which it can be related, *Heimat* too withstands the attempt of a successful translation. *Heimat* basically refers to a community which is organically embedded in a common history and folklore, and in harmony with nature. Its sociological function, as it were, resembled to a large extent the meaning with which the *Volk* was previously vested. Both were ideal responses to conflictual and unresolved political situations. While the *Volk* was in part a response to the fact that Germans lacked a nation-state, the *Heimat* offered a solution to the fragmented character of the German Reich. Some of the fundamental cleavages that persisted in Germany after 1871 were bridged through the *Heimat* concept. Clearly the formation of a territorial defined nation-state, headed by Prussian statist aspirations, required a common vision that could transcend the aforementioned cleavages. Thus the notion of *Heimat* as Confino (1997) points out, represented

after the 1880s the ultimate German community - real and imagined, tangible and symbolic, local and national - of people that had a particular relationship to one another, sharing a past and a future. Germans constructed *Heimat* as an interchangeable representation of the local, the regional, and the national community. As the Germans imagined community, the national *Heimat* was the ultimate expression and the ultimate symbolic representation of the German nation and its histories, memories and sentiments. Similar to the development of the notion of the *Volk*, the idea of the *Heimat* eventually also became highly politicized. In fact, some have argued that the ideological success of Nazi ideology can be found in its ability to appropriate and monopolize these concepts in their political appeals. Opposed to this notion of *Heimat* is the 'homeless', the global, the commercial, in short, the feminine Jew. Remaining in the framework of Elias and his distinction between 'Kultur' und 'Zivilisation', the Jew was representative of civilization and the German of culture. The Jew represented money and abstraction - as in Simmel's *Philosophy of Money*. Money as an abstraction was understood by Simmel to be the root of impersonal relationships between people. Obligations are anonymous and are turned into services. Money therefore tends to extend the concept of equality, in so far as the perception of inequality becomes based upon differences in person. This means that the predominance of money relationships can unintentionally also foster moral relationships (such as compassion) between strangers. The analysis of the metropolis is a case in point. While it was Simmel again who analyzed the 'metropolis' as the locus of freedom fostered by commercialized and de-personalized relationships between people, the very same 'metropolis' was analyzed by German sociologists such as Sombart and Tönnies as the site of alienated and cold relations, as the place where Jews rule. Thus Sombart: 'Now the modern city is nothing else but a great desert, as far removed from the warm earth as the desert is, and like it forcing its inhabitants to become nomads' (1911, 423 - translation mine). And, of course, Sombart believed the Jews to be natural inhabitants of the desert, and by extension, the city. During World War I, Sombart (1915) in his *Händler und Helden* (Merchants and Heroes) viewed the English as the merchant nation (i.e. civilization) par excellence, while the Germans represented concrete heroism (i.e. culture).

In fact, differences can be ascribed to Germany. Elias speaks about 'functional democratization', the emergence not only of a middle class, but of middle class values as well. In Germany, the aristocratic concept of honor and glory outweighed bourgeois concepts of self-interested economic behavior. Thus, a modern notion of compassion arises out of these bourgeois so-called 'self-interested' actions. This suggests that there was

German 'special path' to history, despite the fact that the claim is becoming more discredited among historians and social scientists. I believe we should not dismiss Germany's 'special path' right away. Elias talked about 'honor' in the context of the duel, a habit which increasingly became discredited in countries outside of Germany as an atavistic residue of aristocratic conduct, while in Germany itself (as shown by Frevert 1991 and McAleer 1994) dueling became part of the habitus of a feudalized bourgeoisie. He talks about the brutalization of the German middle classes (see also Dunning & Mennell 1998). Clearly honor and death are tightly connected in the notion of the 'honorable death.' Honor is a positional good (in the words of Charles Taylor 1992), in that my honor is another's disgrace. Further, my honorable death is somebody else's disgraceful death. In the words of the racial thinker Gobineau: 'virtue is not a thing to be required, it is gift from heaven, it is a gift from race'. As Elias pointed out often enough in his *The Germans*, the route from aristocratic to National-Socialist concepts was short enough. While middle classes in other countries, especially in the Anglo-Saxon contexts, developed notions of institutionalized compassion, counter-acting in many ways the brutalities and excesses of modern life and colonialism, in Germany the brutalization of the middle classes prevented this notion of compassion to emerge as a cultural value.

Conclusion

The major challenge to the compassion argument has been voiced by Zygmunt Bauman. In my opinion, his views are biased by misreadings of Elias and Levinas. He produces his own convenient Elias as a theorist of uni-linear evolutionism towards a violent-free world. Such an Elias never existed and Mennell and Dunning (1998) in their introduction to *The Germans* and in a recently published article have set the record straight. Similarly, for Levinas, the social is an extension of the interpersonal. Bauman misreads Levinas as propagating a pre-social morality, a morality that withstands socialization and society. Levinas's 'being with others' is transformed by Bauman into a moral principle opposed to socialization. Hence Bauman looks at the individual as outside of society, even as opposed to society. This view is a-historical, overlooking the historical and structural pre-conditions for the emergence of individualism (as was done by Elias). In fact, Levinas examines the existential modality of interaction between people, a view which has been treated sociologically by Mead, Elias and Habermas. Bauman also 'de-judaizes' Levinas, and completely

neglects the point that for Levinas ethics is Jewish ethics. Jewishness is the particularistic identity that is by nature universalistic. Ethics for Levinas is religious identity, and the identification of the deepest roots of Jewishness with modernity, not as something foreign, but as something invented by Jews. As such it is the antithesis to the above mentioned German habitus. Recall that Sombart compared the city to the desert and located the Jew in those sites. In contrast, the German lives in the concrete forest. Forest and desert have served as archetypal opposites of Germans and Jews, and not only in the anti-Semitic mind. Levinas (1996) in 'Difficult Freedom' tells us that the Jewish person discovers other people before he discovers landscapes. He is at home in a society before he is at home in a house. To be a Jew means to be free, to be disconnected, without roots. In the words of Levinas: 'Man is no tree and mankind no forest'. Bauman misconstrues this abstract relation to the other as an a-sociological point of view. Simmel, Mead and Elias knew otherwise. And so did the Nazis.

It was not modernity which killed the Jews during the Holocaust in the most brutal manner. What killed the Jews, was the direct opposite to its being, namely the Germans. Jews however did not die the normal death of an enemy, but rather a death without honor. A death without compassion. Jews were shipped in wagons all over Europe for weeks for the sole purpose of being killed. They were denied an 'honorable death'. Goldhagen, in his very controversial study, has put his finger on the fact that 'indifference' did not kill the Jews, but rather an active voluntary will to torture and annihilate. Outside the sociological framework, this point was made by the historian of the Holocaust, Saul Friedlander (1992). He speaks of 'Rausch' as the key to the brutal murder of the Jews. A kind of ecstasy. Survivors themselves refer to this concept as well in their memoirs, including Primo Levi (1986) who refers to 'useless violence'. Auschwitz was a cosmopolitan society of uprooted Jews, speaking dozens of languages, having little in common besides being Jews. This was the nightmarish civilization that German culture created. A world without compassion and without ethics and the very antithesis of modernity.

This brings us back to Hannah Arendt and the failure to understand the Holocaust. The choice lies between modernity or counter-modernity, between Goldhagen or Bauman, modern civilization or reverting to barbarism. The preliminaries to a response may be found in a type of modernity which reflectively can become conscious of its own potential for barbarism. To recognize barbarism means that we need a concept of civility that comes with modernity. To recognize barbarism we need a concept of compassion, which lies at the heart of modern liberal society.

If Arendt had not refused to recognize compassion as a political principle, her suggestive thoughts would have led to less confusion.

* I am by no means an historian or an expert researcher on the Holocaust. I am a sociologist with moral sentiments (in particular compassion) although I have tried here to exercise what I feel is the complete opposite of compassion. I would like to thank Omer Bartov for his endless patience in answering my questions. His books and articles have profoundly shaped my reading of 'how to read the Holocaust'.

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