



The Holocaust in the Making: A theoretical Treatise of the Nazi Pogrom and its Relation with Rationality, Modernity and Bureaucracy

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ABSTRACT

The paper is basically a review of the relation between the Nazi pogrom during the Second World War and the foundational elements of modernity, namely rationality and bureaucracy through three scholars. The materialisation of the anxieties that Weber had reserved in his Iron cage formulation could be observed in the unfolding of events that led to the genocide. In Bauman what we see is a kind of objectification of one's own actions which is made possible through the invention of modern technology and bureaucracy. Hilberg, on the other hand, stresses on exploring the historical precedents of modernity simultaneously contributing to the making of the holocaust in the mid 20th century. The paper argues that a consolidated approach becomes necessary while evolving measurements to prevent such mistakes from repeating.

Keywords: *Nazi Holocaust, Modern rationality, Bureaucracy, Max Weber, Hilberg, Zigmunt Bauman*

... the Holocaust has more to say about the state of sociology than sociology in its present shape is able to add to our knowledge of the Holocaust.

From Bauman (1989.p 3)

INTRODUCTION

The above quote reflects the persisting gaps within the sociology of knowledge that would sufficiently account for the circumstances within which the Nazi pogrom was imagined and consolidated as a final solution. According to Bauman modernity, with its impersonal, rigid structures of bureaucracy and a rationality that could be contested, negotiated and foregrounded as an excuse from different, opposing ends of logic, was a necessary factor and a prerequisite for the holocaust to unfold in the mid 20th century. The modern rationality along with its institutions and values, and science and technology deserve

special mention for their crucial significance in constituting the conditions within which the human genocide, a display of industrialised killing, was implemented (Bauman, 1989). Hilberg (1985) in his account has sufficiently articulated the different historical stages that preceded the holocaust and which set the ground ready for the 20th century genocide in all respects ranging from the legal status of such acts within the German territories, and to an extent beyond it, to the fundamentalist thoughts that would accompany such acts. Hilberg's analysis is also marked for the in depth details regarding the

functioning of the pogrom machinery. The 20th century holocaust also makes it possible to be read, and to be interrogated and further explore, as an event which is part of our modernity and all the institutions that mark its existence including bureaucracy. It also throws definite challenges to our understandings of the modern enlightenment rationality to the extent the holocaust conceals and reveals patterns of thinking that equally raise claims to being rational which can, at the same time, lead to the inhuman pogrom.

Nevertheless, the fact that the massacre of Jews could not be identified separately from the historical incidents that preceded it – both within and without any direct or indirect relation to it – and that it has not been the first or the last of such massacres in the name of religion, race, ethnicity etc., might compel any sociological analysis of the 20th century genocide to broaden its perspectives beyond the scope and limits of modernity and rationality. However the relation between the modernity and holocaust gathers much more significance since, as Eberhard Jäckel wrote, “never before had a state with the authority of its responsible leader decided and announced that a specific human group, including its aged, its women and its children and infants, would be killed as quickly as possible, and then carried through this resolution using every possible means of state power” (quoted in Maier 1988, p 53).

This paper is a brief attempt towards understanding the conditions that eventually led to ‘The Holocaust/genocide’ or the Nazi programme during the World War II of racial cleansing or the elimination of Jews in Europe. The paper mainly focuses on the Hilberg’s account of holocaust although it also endeavours to make sense of those conditions from different sociological perspectives including Weber’s notions of bureaucracy and Bauman’s account of modernity and holocaust. The paper also attempts to draw from insights about modern rationality and its direct and indirect association with holocaust. The paper is divided into four sections including this

introduction. In the next section I shall discuss about modern rationality and its role in the holocaust with particular emphasis upon Weber’s account of bureaucracy and Bauman’s accounts in this respect. In the third section Hilberg’s account of holocaust is discussed and the fourth section concludes the paper.

Modern Rationality, Bureaucracy and the Holocaust

According to Weber (1919/1946) modern rationality is more based upon calculations of efficiency than other considerations namely morality or custom or tradition. To put it briefly rationalization means a historical drive towards a world in which “one can, in principle, master all things by calculation” (139). This calculation overwhelms all the activities that take place within modernity ranging from the calculable process of production to calculations embedded within practices of consumption. In the realm of modern governments and administration rationalism and bureaucracy always worked as hand in glove to the extent of attaining goals in the most efficient manner. Bureaucracy is an inevitable element in the execution of the rational calculations. Nevertheless Weber himself was anxious about deploying rationality in all realms as what is considered rational and even desirable from one viewpoint may be understood as just the opposite, irrational, from a different viewpoint. Also his understanding of rationality figured it not only as enhancing people’s freedom via definite institutions but also, at the same time, as limiting this same freedom to the extent of eradicating agency altogether as individuals are reduced to a “cog in machine”: that they are trapped in “an iron cage”. The unhindered exercise of this rationality may eventually culminate where we will be tempted to believe as having attained humanity as never before despite the fact that it would be filled with “Specialist without spirit [and] sensualists without heart” (Weber 1904-05/1992, 182). The modern forms of authority as Weber explains them are the consolidated forms of the exercise of

this modern rationality and bureaucracy remains at the heart of these establishments.

The role of rationality in the 'final solution' becomes more clear in Bauman's account where he observes how the Nazis sought for "more effective means of implementation" and that physical termination of the Jews was chosen "as the most effective and feasible means"(Bauman 1989: p 11). The material means that is required to execute the plans of genocide was essentially provided by modernity of which the bureaucratic attitude of the people involved and the rationale that was exercised while obeying the authority constituted the most important factors. He observes that the "routine bureaucratic procedures" enhanced the planning and coordination of holocaust (17).He discusses these with regard to the basic details of holocaust where a strong bureaucracy had functioned with a clearly defined set of tasks and duties were assigned. Those who performed these tasks, namely packing the trains with people or pressing a button etc., Bauman argues, lost their sight completely of the actual consequences of their obedience to the authority and the duties they performed. Thus the basic morals of humanity were completely lost within the performance of bureaucratic procedures.

This gathers relevance especially in the context of attempts made in the post war scenario to justify many of the soldiers, officers and administrators etc., on the basis of the argument that "they were merely performing their duties" (Laqueur, 2001):duties in this definition implies adherence to the authorities where this obedience itself becomes the goal of actions without any regard for the result that such actions can yield. This also enables us to understand why and how the perpetrator could engage in his tasks without directly involving in the perpetrated actions. The modern bureaucracy has made a larger apparatus available for him that functions like a chain network of hierarchy where the different layers of that hierarchy functions in accordance with the

principle of obedience to the authority. The same principle could again be invoked as sufficient justification for their detachment with, or the pretext that they were not aware of or that they are not bothered about, the outcomes of their performing of these duties. Bauman further expands his arguments to the actual scenario of killing where he observes that the killer's task, during the genocide, was made easier by the modern technological enterprises as the killer had only to deal with machines. His role as a killer, then, is substantially transformed to that of a mere machine operator. This displays the dual moral obligation, albeit standing in opposite directions, involved within the same rational enterprise. The danger of bureaucratic ridden rationality is that it could be invoked as sufficient justification for the inhumane actions that the administration as a whole perpetuates and it also provides the effective and efficient means to execute such strategies.

The Weberian perspective enables us to understand the extent to which modern rationality enhances conditions that could eventually lead to conceptualising inhumane actions as sufficiently rational. The rules bound bureaucracy rids itself of spaces which could challenge its subjectivising potentialities and thus to invoke agency. The materialisation of the anxieties that Weber had reserved in his Iron cage formulation could be observed in the unfolding of events that led to genocide. In Bauman what we see is a kind of objectification of one's own actions which is made possible through the invention of modern technology and bureaucracy. This objectification saves one from the moral responsibility for the actions committed effectively attributing it to the fundamental rational principles associated with modernity. However, accounts based on modern rationality and bureaucracy does not sufficiently address the issue for its historicity. That these accounts generate a picture of 20th human genocide with adequate means that mark modernity does not seem to be sufficiently addressing the question

of why, on the first place, such tendencies persist and has recurred, and still recur, throughout our history. In other words the holocaust of 20th century is not only to be marked for the facts of it being initiated by a state itself or for the deployment of modern means for its effective execution but also for its capacity to recur despite the temporal and spatial realms of such recurrence.

Hilberg's Account of the Holocaust

Although theories of rationalisation and modern apparatuses give a satisfactory account of the holocaust for the many issues and concerns that it generate about our time it does not provide one with a larger picture of the conditions that eventually lead to its occurrences in different periods of time. Hilberg in his book *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1985) provides the historicity of the events that preceded the holocaust and which are crucial to be perceived in order for one to have a larger idea about the event. According to Hilberg the preconditions necessary for genocide was sufficiently formed during the different time periods in history. He goes back to the 4th century in the Christian era to identify the roots of the deep cleavages between Christians and Jews. Anti-Semitism was a deep rooted phenomenon in, mainly, the different parts of Europe from earlier times. The legal political discrimination and the confiscation of assets practiced against the Jews from these earlier times, according to Hilberg, had led its way to their perceived total destruction under the Nazi authority. He observes stark similarities between the canonical and Nazi anti-Jewish measures in terms not only of actions adopted, especially in the early periods of the Nazi regime but also in the way such actions and such attitudes were ascribed a legal status. For instance he identifies parallels in the canonical law many of the measurements that Nazis adopted against the Jews from 1933 onwards. Nevertheless Hilberg's intention is not to neutralise the brutality of the Nazi actions by ascribing historicity to such actions although this

historical background cannot be done away in order to capture the larger picture of the holocaust.

Hilberg suggests that the anti-Jewish policies of conversion and expulsion that the church and the state followed for centuries were identified by the Nazis more as limits than as goals in themselves beyond which neither the state and bureaucracy nor the church could proceed. This is precisely the juncture where the Nazi administrators started to improvise and became innovators to the point that "German bureaucracy under Hitler did infinitely more damage in twelve years than the Catholic Church was capable of in twelve hundred years" (1985, 29). In the beginning of their regime Nazis targeted the Jews and treated them as sub humans. Their living conditions were redefined according to their new status and during this stage the Jews were ghettoized. However this status of being sub humans then gave way to that of anti humans – a reason sufficient enough to start the killing machinery. This transformation took place in the early 1941 when total destruction, or the continental annihilation of European Jews, was adopted as the only resort to get rid of these anti humans. This was started by the Nazis in Germany and the annexed and occupied territories during the war. The search for Jews in Germany and in the rest of the Europe was then intensified with the plans of eradicating them or to bring them under forced labour.

Jews were labelled according to their productive capacities and those who were identified as more productive were sent to the labour camps and the others were sent to the death camps. However in the latter stages, Hilberg identifies, that even those who were identified as productive in the earlier stage were killed by Nazis. The holocaust machinery was gradually approaching towards being absolute with it seeking more and more Jews with the sole intention of annihilating them altogether. The intensity of this growing antipathy towards the very existence of Jews seems to be the only line to distinguish between these different stages of Nazi regime in the context of holocaust.

Although Hilberg explicitly advocates for the intentionality of Nazi regime with regard to holocaust he emphasises more upon the state machinery and its organs than upon Hitler himself.

Although admitting Hitler's involvement and occasional interventions as crucial more important was the role played by the state administration as a whole. Hitler, definitely had an intention to destroy the Jews altogether which he often expressed in very solid terms. But those who were part of the bureaucracy were more energetic towards giving these intentions with interpretations rather than merely dictating them. Thus according to Hilberg the Nazi holocaust was essentially a bureaucratic process and it was the state's bureaucracy that drove forward, with much more lethal effects, the policies those were inflicted upon the Jews. The internal competition among the Nazi state's agencies and their unanimous agreement on the ultimate purposes of the state were all potential inputs for the effective implementation of the plans of holocaust. Hilberg also throws light on the psychological dimensions of the total destruction. The principal obstacle in this regard was to do with the challenges invoked by conscience against actions intended for such heinous motives. Here again the historicity of the event gathers significance as the moral questions inherently invoked by the pursued actions were mitigated by portraying the object as a synonym of the evil and as the enemy of the whole human kind that must be done away. Hilberg shows how historical figures (Martin Luther King for example) were often quoted to substantiate these theories that would further aggravate the common sentiments against the Jews in Germany.

However Hilberg's central thesis remains in the centrality of the German Bureaucacy in the holocaust. What makes Hilberg's account different is the perspective it makes available regarding not only holocaust and its historicity but also with regard to criminal politics. Unlike Bauman Hilberg evaluates the holocaust from the

multiple dimensions and although bureaucracy gathers a central role in his thesis his formulations of the historicity and the socio psychological dimensions of criminal politics and fundamental behaviour are also significant. For instance his indication towards drawing from historical examples in order to aggravate the Aryan sentiments among the Germans could definitely be understood as part of the attempts to constitute stereotypes in order to invoke and consolidate negative images of the enemy group: an event that marks the contemporary fundamentalist enterprises and even those attempts that function under the pretext of opposing them.

CONCLUSION

Although an analysis of modern rationality can sufficiently account for the implementation of the 20th century Nazi pogrom it does not sufficiently account for its historical precedence: nor does it provide deeper insights pertaining to similar tendencies persisting in different contexts all over the world albeit in different and newer forms. In other words of modernity and rationalisation accounts of holocaust do not add to the fundamental constructions behind such human tendencies and criminal politics that lie beneath in time and recur during different periods in different forms. Rationalisation indeed provides one with deeper insights as to how such incidents can occur within our times and how the modern science, technology and other rational apparatuses have apparently contributed to their materialisation. But, as I earlier mentioned, only by sufficiently considering the genealogy of these events can we have a fuller picture since this history is reflected in the contemporary times.

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