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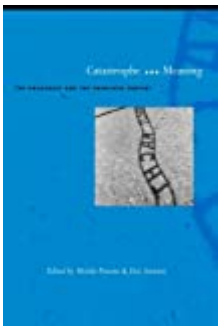

Moishe Postone, Eric L. Santner. *Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 280 S. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-67611-1.

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Too Big for History–But not Too Big for Blame

This impressive collection of essays stems from a conference held at the University of Chicago in November 1998. The collection grapples with the implications of the profound novelty and the cultural rupture of the European Holocaust. However, from the perspective of the millennium, the Holocaust has become merely the first of a number of genocidal projects that, according to the editors, necessitates the "urgency of further and ever more refined analyses of this historical shift and 'birth' of this mutation of human possibilities" (p. 7).

In order to pursue this more refined analysis, the essays in the volume engage four "clusters" of issues. The first cluster "pertains to the place and nature of anti-Semitism" (p. 8) in the unfolding of the genocide. The two contributors to this section, Saul Friedlnder and Shulamit Volkov repeat in a nuanced and sophisticated form the long-standing historiographical debate between the intentionalists (who argue Hitler and his peculiar brand of anti-Semitism were the source of Auschwitz) versus the functionalists (who argue Auschwitz was the culmination of not only anti-Semitism but a wide variety of factors such as the science of eugenics, dehumanizing technology, instrumental rationality, bureaucracy, and total war). Friedlnder wants to maintain his well-known version of the intentionalist argument by reemphasizing the role of Hitler's quasi-religious redemptive anti-Semitism. According to Friedlnder the peculiarly virulent form of anti-Semitism stems from "the convergence of racial anti-Semitic themes and of the redemption of an Aryan Christian humanity by the struggle against and victory over the Jews" (p. 18). Friedlnder concludes that the turning point toward Auschwitz lay in the U.S. entry into the war, which "turned what could still be considered a European war into a world war in its fullest sense" (p. 27), noting that Hitler's central rhetorical innovation was to speak of "Europe" increasingly after June 1941 (p. 28). In contrast to Friedlnder, Volkov examines the connection between ideology and praxis that characterizes National Socialism. Rather than questioning details of Friedlnder's interpretation, she challenges his account on a philosophical level, claiming that "only those narratives that manage to substitute the question *how* for that of *why* seem to get at least *near* an explanation of the Holocaust" and argues for a detail-oriented strategy that leads to "rare moments of cognition" (p. 45). Although this point is

deeply tied to debates in the philosophy of history and urges a praiseworthy stringency of analysis, it does not really offer new tasks to the historian and thus falls somewhat flat, since all historical explanations are marked by elision of details and hermeneutic anxiety.

The second cluster of essays, the apex of the collection, cuts to the heart of the volume's urgency in assessing the Holocaust's place in the "general historical narratives that span the twentieth century in Europe" (p. 9). This theme is developed by Anson Rabinbach's lead essay, which focuses on the post-war generation of German Jewish exiles and their attempts to come to terms with the caesura of Auschwitz. Rabinbach describes how for the migrs (especially Hannah Arendt, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno) Auschwitz could not be explained by Germany's *Sonderweg*, but rather could only be understood in light of modernity. According to Rabinbach, "the discourse of the modernity of the Holocaust was a counterdiscourse to the thesis of a German *Sonderweg*, the Eurocentric response of the German Jewish exiles to what they perceived to be an excessively Germanophobic discourse" (p. 55). This claim raises the problem of why were the migrs so loyal to German culture? Or, as Rabinbach ponders, "Was the migrs' insistence on the modernity of the genocide a subtle exculpation of their own 'Germanness'?" (p. 59). Rabinbach rejects this interpretation, arguing instead that the migrs' allegiance was to the German tradition of *Kulturkritik* because "they believed German cultural criticism, even where it was most corrupted by the proximity to Nazism, could still be mobilized against the power of barbarism (p. 60), thus placing critiques of the Enlightenment in its service–as Rabinbach admits, quite treacherous intellectual ground. Rabinbach frames the resulting dilemma as the new crisis of modernity, "the high tension act necessary to keep in balance the imperatives of a rational civilization and the seductive mythologies it inevitably engenders" (p. 63).

The second essay by Dan Diner inquires "into the specific conceptual difficulties faced by the historian in attempting to adequately integrate the event of the Holocaust into the flow of twentieth-century history" (p. 69). Diner makes the somewhat grandiose assertion that "today the Holocaust stands at the negative core of European self-understanding" (p. 69). For him the Holocaust is "assuming the character of an icon ... like the ultimate core event of 'our' time" (p. 67). It seems to me, however, in light of the more recent outbreaks of genocidal fury that the Holocaust is slowly being *normalized* as the first modern genocide (increasing awareness of the Armenian genocide notwithstanding). In the end Diner concludes that integrating the Holocaust "into the course of history [with] the construction of an appropriate historical narration for an event unprecedented in its brevity and extremity, somehow disconnected from the past and future, still remains an insurmountable task" (p. 78). This claim comes across as essentially rhetorical, and also contradicts his other concluding point that "what makes the Holocaust so exceptional is the fact that in a very dense period of time, three or four different historical currents–anti-Semitism, ethnic cleansing, racial warfare, and the practices of euthanasia–were fused and thus cumulated into an exceptional human catastrophe" (p. 78).

Readers unfamiliar with more contemporary strains in Marxist thought will find Moishe Postone's long essay, with its twelve sections, a challenging read. Sections 1 through 7 analyze the Holocaust "with reference to historical processes on a deep structural level" (p. 82) before the event, while the remaining sections investigate the relationship between these processes and collective memory after the war. In order not to lose the specificity of the Holocaust via comparisons, Postone turns to reconsider modern anti-Semitism. However, he does not want to explain "*why* Nazism and modern anti-Semitism became hegemonic in Germany" but rather "*what it was* that became hegemonic by suggesting an analysis of modern anti-Semitism that indicates its intrinsic connection to National Socialism" (p. 88). In his explanation of both modern anti-Semitism and what the historian Jeffrey Herf described as the "reactionary modernism" of National Socialism, Postone relies on the Marxian concept of fetishism, "forms of thought that remain bound to the forms of appearance of capitalist social relations, thereby hypostatizing or naturalizing those social relations" (p. 90). Thus modern anti-Semitism "is a particularly pernicious fetish form" that "is a revolt against history as constituted by capitalism, misrecognized as a Jewish conspiracy" (p. 95). By reading anti-Semitism as "fetishized anticapitalism" Postone explains the reactionary modernism of Nazism as a "fetishized anticapitalist movement, one characterized by hatred of the abstract, [the Jews] [and] a hypostatization of the existing concrete" (p. 95). Therefore the "real German revolution" was not 1933 but rather Auschwitz, which was "a factory to 'destroy value,' that is, to destroy personifications of the abstract" (p. 95). Postone's Marxian analysis comes across as a fascinating way to connect anti-Semitism and capitalism. Nevertheless, economic determinism that demonizes capitalism has lost much of its intellectual appeal. Certainly anti-Semitism as a fetish of an anti-capitalist movement offers a nice twist. But

the historical reality of anti-Semitism, as Postone is very aware (p. 94), is deeply tied to the peculiar social position of the Jews in modernity and, more importantly, modern nationalism. In addition, it appears that not only advanced capitalist societies break into genocidal fury.

In the second half of his essay Postone continues his depiction of how the Holocaust is "deeply intertwined with history as constituted by capital" (p. 96) by focusing on collective memory. In this section Postone positions himself against Charles Maier's contention "that the growing centrality of historical memory in public discourse expresses a historical break that marks an end of the forward directedness of the postwar decades" (p. 97). Postone faults Maier for not doing full justice to the issue's complexity (p. 97), turning to a neo-Freudian view where the "marginalization of the Holocaust discourse for two decades after the war ... generated a sort of bifurcated historical reality: a new, future-oriented present on the surface and, underneath, a past that had not been worked through" (p. 98). Postone calls for "a historical approach that would ... discover ... the possibility of a new form of universality that can encompass difference and a new future directedness that can appropriate the past" (p. 102). To point the way to such approaches Postone refers to Walter Benjamin's notion of "homogenous empty time," which "abandons the transhistorical notion that human history in general has a dynamic, in favor of the claim that a historical dynamic is a historically specific character of capitalism" (p. 103). According to Postone, the historical dynamic of capitalism "ceaselessly generates what is 'new' while regenerating what is the 'same' " (p. 104), which constitutes two forms of time, "abstract" (involving "the accumulation of the past in a form that entails the ongoing reconstruction of the fundamental features of capitalism as an apparently necessary present") and "historical" ("concrete, heterogeneous, and directional"; p. 104). According to Postpone, both are "forms of domination" because "historical time in capitalism is constituted in an alienated form that reinforces the necessity of the present" (p. 104). Postone's ambitious diagnosis of our current dilemma and desire to impart a new future orientation that overcomes repetition of the past and articulate a form of universality that respects difference are honorable. However, Postone's depiction of the dilemma is not convincing; how are we to judge whose future orientation correctly appropriates the past? And how can something be universal and respect difference?

The third cluster of essays is more uneven, less thematically unified and touches on a broad range of issues including memory, identity, agency, and victimhood. The lead essay by Omer Bartov offers an excellent reflection on the origins of fascist ideology and Nazism in the trenches of the Great War and a wonderful depiction of the differing subcultures produced by the war in France and Germany, a "French *community of suffering*" in contrast to the "German *battle community*" (p. 123). The culture of the Great War is tied directly to Hitler because "for millions of Germans Hitler came to symbolize the unknown soldier of World War I" (p. 127). Bartov concludes with a reflection on how the "extraordinary motivation and resilience of the Wehrmacht during World War II was ... a function of its perception of war as an opportunity to rectify the errors of 1914-18 and redress the abomination of defeat" (p. 127). By 1941 this culture of revenge led German "troops ... to view their criminal actions as the very essence of military glory, as exacting a just and necessary retribution for past defeats and humiliations and as ensuring the final victory" (p. 129). Thus this culture–now a *community of murder*–took on a frighteningly surreal quality with the genocide against the Jews (p. 131). Bartov's essay is a wonderful piece of historical writing that is ideal for introducing undergraduates to the ideological origins of Nazism or as example to graduate students of how to practice the craft of history.

The second essay in this section is Frank Trommler's reflection on German attitudes toward the Holocaust and the intergenerational dialectic. According to Trommler, an initial "collective silence" stemmed from a "psychic numbing" after the catastrophe. The therapeutic approach that had begun with Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's *Inability to Mourn* was carried out by the sons and daughters of the war generation but began to fade with a third generation disconnected from events. This rupture subsequently led "to a new cultivation of memory" (p. 140). In charting the collective memory Trommler claims the Holocaust underwent a transition "from a subject of shame and evasion to an almost proudly demonstrated wound in the national body politic" (p. 140). Even this transformation, however, did not signal a deepening of mourning. Trommler connects this claim to the appeal of Daniel Goldhagen's thesis of eliminationist anti-Semitism amongst Germans with the quip "it takes three generations to embrace collective guilt, yet it is the embrace of something outside of one's own biography" (p. 140). Trommler adds the insight that part of the German inability to mourn stems from the fact the Germans were "deeply drawn into the culture of mourning before 1945" based on the Nazi cult

of the dead and the German experience of the Great War. This culture, in combination with the magnitude of German atrocities, led to an "emotional immobilization" and silence after 1945 (p. 147). Trommler concludes with a reflection on how some in the German second and third generations expected some kind of closure or restitution of an earlier normality. However, he feels that in the 1990s it became clear, and one imagines the Goldhagen controversy is the backdrop for his point, that this resolution is impossible (p. 150).

Deborah Dwork's essay on events at Budy is the final essay in this cluster. Dwork's essential concern is that by "focusing on individual characteristics of the victims, such as age, social class, degree of religious observance, political affiliation, or gender" we can augment our understanding of the Holocaust (p. 154). By analyzing the different accounts of the murder of ninety Jewish women at Budy (part of the complex at Auschwitz) Dwork aspires to bring us closer to the actual "daily lives of Jewish women during the war, the history of Auschwitz and the way we think about and write history" (p. 155). Dwork's short article compares the Slovak Auschwitz survivor Helen Tichauer-Spitzer's oral testimony on the massacres with Auschwitz's Kommandant Hss's account and the recollections of SS lieutenant Pery Broad. Dwork is correct in her concluding assertion that "we may never know what happened at Budy, and it may not matter. What matters, and matters very much, is that our exploration of these events challenges us to face our own prejudices and assumptions" (p. 166). Dwork challenges us to recover the individuality of the victims and thus urges our understanding of something seemingly incomprehensible.

The book's final section is "an extended meditation on and exploration of what might be called the 'virtual archives' ... in which the traces of the 'aporia of Auschwitz,' so easily missed by normal historical research, are still legible" (p. 13). Froma Zeitlin looks at the "emotional and cognitive issues that inhabit the inner landscapes of haunted memory" (p. 176) in three literary works–Anne Michael's *Fugitive Pieces*, Bernard Schlink's *The Reader*, and Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*. Zeitlin's essay unifies the three works as representing " 'a surplus of memory' underlying present experience ready to resurface into uncanny repetition or painful contrast" (p. 202). On the whole the analysis is strong, although it appears that the essay was originally drafted before the revelation that Wilkomirski was a fraud. In light of that revelation this essay needed to be re-thought, though in this form it does include several sparkling insights.

In his contribution, Dominick La Capra reflects convincingly on the pitfalls and possibilities of testimony as a historical source. He first tackles the problem of "traumatic memory" which "may involve distortion, disguise, and other permutations relating to processes of imaginative transformation and narrative shaping perhaps as well as repression, denial, dissociation, and foreclosure" (p. 211). In the process of gaining objectivity, the traumatized according to La Capra engages in the act of performative narration, which "extends over the analytically distinguishable but existentially intertwined processes of acting out, working over, and working through" (p. 211). In turning to the task of the historian, La Capra focuses in on the issue of how to think through "traumatic limit events," describing pitfalls that have marked much of the thinking on the Holocaust in the last thirty years. La Capra does a service by asking us to move beyond them. But the dilemma that created them–How can we gain objectivity about unimaginable horror?– remains. In tackling this issue La Capra makes a distinction between objectivity and excessive objectification and argues we must question both "the idea of a fully transparent, unproblematic representation of the way things in the past 'really were' " and recognize "the need to come to terms with one's transferential implication in the object of the study" (p. 218). La Capra critiques Goldhagen on the basis of his overidentification with the victims, raising the issue of the role of empathy in historical understanding. Taking a cue from Foucault, La Capra argues for "emphatic unsettlement" which is "an aspect of understanding which stylistically upsets the narrative voice and counteracts harmonizing narration or unqualified objectification, yet allows for a tense interplay between critical, necessary objectifying reconstruction and affective response to the voices of the victims" (p. 223). Although as injunction for historians this suggestion is accurate, it is not clear to me what exactly about it is novel. Even more vague is La Capra's connected claim that we should "even entertain the possibility of carefully framed movements in which the historian attempts more risk laden, experimental overtures in an attempt to come to terms with limit events" (p. 223). To be fair, this vagueness stands this side of millions of unspoken testimonies, and thousands tortuous testimonies, full of broken shattered lives and beset with fragmented memories.

The final two essays in the collection are a reflection on hope. Geoffrey Hartman composes a meditation on Maurice Blanchot's project "to find an alternative to the language of historical hope" (p. 237). According to

Hartman, at the heart of Blanchot's project stand both Hegelian concept of meaning in history and the Holocaust. Blanchot defined the Holocaust as "as an absolute event in which history itself burns up ... so that 'the movement of meaning was ruined' " (p. 240). This requires that Blanchot seek "a different spiritual language one that is neither theological nor a displacement of the theological." Hartman suggests that Blanchot does not achieve this new language but "describes what guarantees its possibility .... a contemplative streak, the 'dsinteress du dsastre'" which suggests that "disaster brings with it a special detachment." This detachment, stemming from the disaster, represents a certain freedom "from it as an obsessive, singular object of concern" (p. 241). The final essay by Paul Mendes-Flohr, which plumbs the relationships between obligation, mourning, and hope, reads as if it is directed toward the religiously inclined.

Postone and Santner deserve a great deal of credit for condensing into one collection many of the most significant issues in Holocaust studies. The essays are marked by an intellectual profundity. One suspects that the overarching theme–the Holocaust in the broader processes of the twentieth century–was formulated in direct response to the Goldhagen debate, which was raging at the time of the original conference. That anxious debate has subsided, but as Darfur spins into genocide, innocent civilians are being subjected to "smart bombs" while suicide bombers proliferate in the Middle East and Westerners and their allies are beheaded, it appears sadly that the great "hope" of Holocaust studies–to remember so it never happens again–has come to naught. From this perspective the sense of urgency that motivated the contributors to this volume to come to terms with the caesura of Auschwitz has only been heightened.