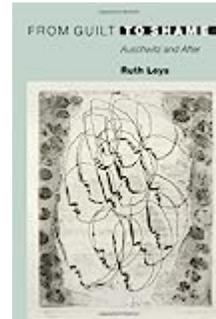




Ruth Leys. *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. ix + 200 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-13080-4.



Reviewed by Jason Crouthamel (Grand Valley State University)

Published on H-German (March, 2008)

A Genealogy of Guilt and Shame

The horrific conditions of the death camps, where Nazis forced victims to do the “dirty work” in order to survive, generated incredibly complex long-term psychological problems for survivors. The concept of survivor guilt is a central part of Holocaust scholarship and pedagogy. Historians have relied on it to understand the psychological underpinnings of memoirs by Primo Levi or interviews with survivors in documentaries like Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985). Influential scholars like Lawrence Langer, who raises concerns about the idea deflecting responsibility from the real culprits to survivors, have problematized survivor guilt.[1] Nevertheless, the concept of guilt has become a vital part of scholars’ thinking about the psychology of survivors, a testimony to the long-term influence of 1950s and 1960s psychoanalytic work on survivors, their unconscious fears of collusion, and the effects of coping with unfathomable layers of violence. More recently, in an effort to move away from the implication that survivors unconsciously identified with perpetrators, scholars have placed greater attention on shame rather than guilt as a central category of analysis.

In this volume, Ruth Leys considers this debate over Holocaust survivors as a phenomenon with broader cultural significance, and, she contends, “the change from a culture of guilt to a culture of shame in Western thinking about the emotions is highly significant and has important consequences” (p. 4). The focus on survivor guilt has long been seen as problematic, because it suggests survivors mimicked perpetrators in the “grey zone” of the camps, where the boundaries between victim and perpetrator blurred, when in fact the “grey zone” was a necessary location for survival.[2] Leys contends that the shift from guilt to shame can also be understood in the context of a larger conflict between mimetic and antimimetic approaches to trauma theory, which she explored in her previous book *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000). The key question for Leys is whether the recent focus on shame theory reflects antimimetic theory; that is, the idea that rather than being “caught up or blindly immersed in the scene of the shock” (mimetic theory), the subject of trauma remains “a spectator of the scene, which he can therefore see and represent to himself” (p. 9). According to shame theory, the trauma survivor is in no way collusive with the violence suffered, and the victim’s psyche

has greater potential for recovery. The development of shame theory, Leys argues, represents a shift from psychoanalytical emphasis on the survivors' emotions and intentions toward an emphasis on identity and differences in personal experience.

Leys stresses that her book is not a study of the psychiatric responses to survivors of the Holocaust, but rather an intellectual history of the shift from guilt to shame theory since World War II. Thus, her chapters are organized to trace the genealogy of guilt and shame. The first chapter traces the development of the concept of survivor guilt since 1945, focusing on theories developed by psychoanalysts consulted in the creation of West German reparation laws, which granted compensation for individuals who suffered emotional disabilities because of their experiences in the camps. In particular, restitution was made to those suffering under what was diagnosed as "survivor syndrome," a term used to describe the long-term depression and guilt in response to traumatic stress experienced in the war. Leys argues that many survivors applying for compensation did not distinguish between guilt and shame—the present-day debate over the difference between these emotions is actually a relatively recent development. Nevertheless, these emotions, which consisted of a whole range of feelings including innocence and culpability, were interpreted according to mimetic theories by psychoanalysts who stressed the guilt felt by survivors, exemplified in accounts like those of Levi's, which suggested identification with perpetrators and feelings of collusion.

In the second chapter, Leys traces widespread attacks in the 1970s on psychoanalytic concepts of survivor guilt. This chapter focuses on the work of Terrence Des Pres and others that emerged after the controversy over the role of the Jewish councils, which was raised by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). Des Pres rejected the notion of survivor guilt because of its implication of collusion. Instead, he characterized survivors as coming through the camp experience with their integrity intact. According to Des Pres, survivors did not identify unconsciously with their Nazi oppressors, but instead consciously imitated perpetrator behavior in order to cover up their own essentially ethical and compassionate feelings. Des Pres spearheaded widespread criticism of the Freudian approach, which he criticized as offering only a narrow interpretation of the emotional universe of survivors. By the late 1970s to early 1980s, the shift from guilt to shame theory had not yet taken place, but the decades-long psychoanalytic paradigm had been substantially weakened, creating conditions for revising the

concept of survivor guilt altogether.

In chapter 3, Leys links the erosion of survivor guilt theory to the reconceptualization of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the 1980s. When the American Psychiatric Association removed survivor guilt from the diagnostic criteria for PTSD in 1987, the path was opened to greater focus on shame in discussions of PTSD symptoms. The "traumatic image" became the center of PTSD, which was now defined as caused by external stress, rather than mimetic, or internal identification with the cause of the trauma (p. 93). In treatment of Vietnam veterans or victims of sexual violence and genocide, shame has taken on central significance as the emotion that defines traumatic stress. Leys argues that this reassessment of PTSD was just the beginning of a broader cultural focus on shame, a development explored in chapter 4. In an overview of psychological, biological, and literary-critical works on trauma, Leys traces a radical reconsideration of shame as a potentially positive, rather than destructive emotion which, unlike guilt, can bring forth healing. This new trend in trauma theory follows what Leys describes as an anti-intentionalist paradigm, in which no emotional identification takes place between the traumatized and the oppressor, as was assumed by the intentionalist paradigm developed by psychoanalysts. Many theorists, Leys notes, believe that shame is more productive than guilt, and they follow an "affect program theory" of the emotions that defines shame in anti-intentionalist, biological terms, completely replacing the survivor guilt theory, which embraced an intentionalist paradigm and assumed the traumatized subject emotionally identified with the aggressor.

In chapter 5, however, Leys critiques this intentionalist approach to modern shame theory as untenable. Here she returns to the topic of the Holocaust to analyze recent studies that re-think the significance of survivors' memoirs. Leys concentrates on Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), which de-emphasizes the experience of survivor guilt in Primo Levi's *The Drowned and Saved* (1988). Leys interprets Agamben's work as part of the anti-intentionalist paradigm of trauma theory and raises the question of whether or not it accurately interprets Levi's emotional response to survival in Auschwitz.

Leys' book is successful as an intellectual history of survivors' guilt and shame theory. It will be most valuable to scholars across disciplines dealing with the psychological legacy of the Holocaust. By presenting her work as history of trauma, rather than an ethical or political critique of guilt and shame theory, Leys' work

maintains its focus and provides a balanced assessment of the context in which these different interpretations of trauma have unfolded. For scholars interested in the larger historical context that shaped theoretical interpretations of survivor accounts, Leys' work will be a fascinating contribution to the vast historiography on the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust.

Notes

[1]. Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[2]. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1988).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Jason Crouthamel. Review of Leys, Ruth, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14347>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.