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Can we understand the Holocaust?

Henry Maitles

Review essay of Enzo Traverso, 2019 *Critique of Modern Barbarism: Essays on fascism, anti-Semitism and the use of History*, (Amsterdam: IIRE) £17

Can the insights of Marxism help us to understand the Holocaust? Marxism is a body of theoretical and experiential understanding, which tries to explain the rationality behind history, but the fusion of racism, slave labour, oppression, persecution, irrationalism and barbarism involved in the Holocaust and Auschwitz is hard to explain even with Marxism's insights. Enzo Traverso has grappled with these issues over many years, producing a number of key works, with insights which have helped our understanding immensely. Indeed, this work, which brings a number of his key ideas together, is actually a useful starting point for new readers. Whilst there are no new insights in this it is a useful rephrasing and bringing together of his ideas, as the publishers acknowledge, and that makes it welcome. I re-read his *The End of Jewish Modernity*¹ and the pathbreaking ideas in *Understanding the Nazi Genocide*² for talks I gave around Holocaust Memorial Day in 2020 and most of the ideas and insights in them are repeated in this new volume.

What this volume does is remind us that Auschwitz, as a symbol of the Holocaust, was the final break with the idea developed through the Enlightenment that civilization and progress will inexorably lead to a better, more just world, even if the transportation and murder of Africans during the slave trade, the Armenian Genocide of 1915-16 and numerous other genocides, atrocities and war crimes give us some idea of what Rosa Luxemburg meant when she talked about one possible road of human development leading to barbarism. The book itself is nicely edited by Alex de Jong into 3 parts: Interpreting History; Debates; The left and anti-Semitism.

The first part takes up the debate about the uniqueness of the Holocaust, particularly looking at Marxism as a social theory to explain the Holocaust. It is a satisfying summary, although not new. He handles succinctly the debate between the

¹ Traverso, 2016

² Traverso, 1999

‘intentionalists’ (who give primacy to the idea that the Nazis had planned from the 1920s to physically destroy all Jews) and the ‘functionalists’ (who argue that the Nazis, following the invasion of Russia in 1941, found themselves with millions of Jews that they were then able to move to exterminate, as they could see no other solution). He argues, I think correctly, that there are kernels of truth in both, that Nazi theory from its inception had genocidal intent and wanted to make Europe Jew free and the expansion of the war into USSR gave them the impetus and wherewithal to do so, as Nazi policy evolved during the 1930s and the war from forced emigration to extermination. Whilst most observers and writers are either more or less intentionalist or functionalist, what Traverso does is to place the ideology of fascism in an era of imperialist war and thus increase our understanding.³

Indeed, should we even try to explain the Holocaust and Auschwitz? Writers as diverse as Elie Wiesel⁴ and Theodore Adorno⁵ think that it cannot be properly understood and cannot be analysed, whatever social tool one wants to use; that the Holocaust is beyond any understanding, no matter what theoretical perspectives are employed. Adorno goes as far as to say that ‘*to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric*’.⁶ I agree with Traverso though that we have to try to understand it, primarily because if ‘Never Again’ is to mean anything, we have to have some idea of what it is we don’t want again. A related point is about the uniqueness of the Holocaust. It has even been argued that debating the uniqueness can be holocaust denial⁷. Traverso argues against this and puts it very well in the book: ‘*The best way to keep the memory of a genocide alive is not to deny the existence of others, nor to create a religious cult around it, discussing any comparison as a dangerous attempt at profanity*’.⁸ The Holocaust was murderous and genocidal, but what makes it unique is the mixture of scientific racism with the most modern bureaucratic and industrial capitalist techniques. Auschwitz was indeed ‘*the largest human slaughterhouse*’ as

³ For a fuller discussion on this, see Callinicos, 2001.

⁴ Wiesel, 1993

⁵ Adorno, 1983

⁶ Ibid, p34

⁷ For a fuller discussion on this, see Finkelstein, 2000 pp41-49

⁸ Traverso, 2019 p248

the longest serving commandant called it⁹ or ‘assembly like style mass murder’ as the US Holocaust Memorial museum describes it¹⁰. Primo Levi argues that

*... notwithstanding the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the shame of the Gulags, the useless and bloody Vietnam war, the Cambodian self-genocide, the desaparecidos of Argentina, and the many atrocious and stupid wars we have seen since, the Nazi concentration camp system still remains a unicum, both in its extent and quality ... never were so many human lives extinguished in so short a time, and with so lucid a combination of technological ingenuity, fanaticism and cruelty.*¹¹

This type of thinking has led some authors with very good insights to argue that modernity per se is the issue¹². Whilst theories of modernity have tried with some success to explain the Holocaust, in some ways they can be limited as they do not properly take up the specific capitalist relations that were involved. Traverso has been welcomingly clear about this point and in particular that ‘progress’-- capitalist development per se -- is not necessarily a precursor to socialism¹³.

Marxism has tried to grapple with the issues of the Holocaust and Auschwitz through an understanding of the complex relationships of the means of production and the forms of rule, which enabled an embattled capitalism to survive, and indeed on occasion, thrive. This involved the major sections of German capitalism – most of whom had no particular desire for the Nazis or for the genocide – to create the conditions in which the Nazi regime was able to rule in their interest, even if they lost control of the process and the Nazis increasingly behaved in ways that major sections of German capitalism was uneasy about. For the Nazis, their racial ideas were cement for their cadre. This explains some of the seeming irrationalities of their genocide. For example, why on June 6 1944 as the Allies were landing in Normandy and the Russians had launched a massive attack in the East, was the transfer of 400 Salonikan Jews to Auschwitz a key order from the High Command? Why, during massive labour shortages were ‘trained’ slave labour Jews replaced by ‘untrained’ labour to

⁹ Hoess, 2000 p207

¹⁰ USHMM, 2016

¹¹ Levi, 1989 pp9-10

¹² Bauman, 1989

¹³ Traverso, 1999

the anger of some leading industrialists? This irrationality can only be explained by understanding that the German ruling class needed the Nazis and the Nazis needed the Holocaust. Put crudely, the regime might go down to defeat, but in the process they'll kill as many Jews as possible, one of their core key aims. Indeed, Dawidowitz argues that the Second World War contained within it, what she called, a war against the Jews¹⁴. The primacy of Nazi ideology in the development of the Holocaust is critical to understanding that, even if economic pressures – for example, food shortages in the occupied USSR or expropriation of Jewish property – may have helped motivate particular murder campaigns, the extermination of the Jews cannot be explained in economic terms. Raul Hilberg argues that *'in the preliminary phase [the isolation and expropriation of the Jews] financial gains, public or private, far outweighed expenses, but ... in the killing phase receipts no longer balanced losses'*.¹⁵ From the standpoint of the war effort, the Holocaust destroyed scarce skilled workers and diverted rolling stock from military purposes. Individual capitalist firms such as I.G. Farben undoubtedly profited from the extermination of the Jews and slave labour, but, however instrumentally rational the bureaucratic organization of the Holocaust may have become, this crime was not dictated solely by considerations of profitability or of military strategy.¹⁶

The second section of the book takes up arguments about the Holocaust. The short chapter on Goldhagen is, I think, a little bit too balanced, if such a thing does not seem contradictory. Traverso praises Goldhagen for highlighting the anti-Semitism of the Nazis and that the Holocaust was not merely functionalist and for stimulating a debate amongst German youth, but seems to me to ignore that Goldhagen's thesis¹⁷ about the 'ordinary' Germans, as opposed to the Nazis, being responsible for the Holocaust has some impact outside the academy. In Poland, for example, where the government wanted to outlaw argument that Poles were involved in the genocide, the new Warsaw Museum of Jewish History very much categorises the atrocities committed in Poland as 'german' rather than 'nazi'. This allows Polish collaborators off the hook. Traverso argues that we should avoid the *'no holds barred demolition'* of Goldhagen's thesis. I think that this is weak and that Goldhagen should be strongly

¹⁴ Dawidowicz, 1986

¹⁵ Hilberg, 1985 p735

¹⁶ For a wider discussion on this area, see Callinicos, 2001

¹⁷ Goldhagen, 1996

critically dealt with¹⁸. Traverso's discussion around the works of Novick, Finkelstein, Snyder and Lanzmann are more nuanced and I think have more merit than the chapter on Goldhagen and, whilst he thinks Finkelstein's *The Holocaust Industry*¹⁹ is a bit crude, he defends him against his detractors as he calls it '*an opportunity for a debate on the politics of memory and on the public uses of history*'²⁰. On Snyder, Traverso is on a firm polemical stance. He berates Snyder for both linking the Nazi project with the Green project – both being, according to Snyder, concerned with resource implications – and for his admiration of the Zionists, such as Begin, Shamir and Netanyahu, who, Snyder claims, understand the importance of controlling scarce resources. He argues that Snyder '*preaches Zionist and neoconservative platitudes, and obscures more history than he uncovers*'.²¹ The chapter on Lanzmann, the author of Shoah²², highlights the paradox between Lanzmann's anti-colonialism and his strong Zionism, which as Traverso says '*saw him shamefully deny the oppression of the Palestinians in the occupied territories*'²³. Shoah itself, as one might expect in a more than nine hour film highlights his contradictory approaches and his later films both highlight the catastrophe and the account has all Germans as Nazis, all Jews as victims and bystanders as accomplices. He avoids the difficult areas raised by, for example, Primo Levi as the '*grey zone*',²⁴ that space between outright opposition and outright collaboration which haunted the survivors. Traverso points out that in Lanzmann's mindset the Jewish Councils who collaborated with the Nazis are let off the hook, although we must also acknowledge that the choices were complex and difficult. Zionism led Lanzmann to believe that Israel is the only bulwark against anti-Semitism and Traverso welcomingly takes him to task for that.

The third section of the book, entitled *The left and anti-Semitism*, raises questions of how we might stop the rise of fascist organization today. Traverso rightly points out the weaknesses of both the leaderships and theory of the SPD and KPD in their lack of understanding of the Nazis. The Left and Jewish community organisations in Germany thought that the Nazi promotion to power in 1933 was a transient moment.

¹⁸ Finkelstein, 2000; Maitles, 1997; Shandley, 1998

¹⁹ Finkelstein, 2000

²⁰ Traverso, 2019 p147

²¹ Ibid p177

²² Lanzmann, 1985

²³ Traverso, 2019 p179

²⁴ Levi, 1988

In this way, we can understand the slogan of the KPD towards Hitler's ascension to power in the early 1930s, attributed to Ernst Thälmann the KPD leader: '*After Hitler, our turn*'; The Centralverein (Jewish leadership organization) argued (2 days after Hitler was appointed Chancellor) that Jews should not panic, that '*no one will dare to touch our constitutional rights*' and asked its members to avoid the anti-Nazi demonstrations and stay calm²⁵.

The issue of the united front called for by Trotsky and his small band of supporters from the early 1930s went unheeded by the SPD and KPD. These 2 organisations were more suspicious of each other than of the transient, as they saw it, NSDAP. The KPD held that the SPD were 'social fascist' and no better than the Nazis, indeed by hiding the true nature under the nomenclature of socialism, the SPD was more duplicitous and dangerous. The SPD believed that the KPD was anti-democratic and followed orders from Moscow. Traverso argues here that it was their lack of understanding of anti-Semitism that was the main problem. I think this is a mistake. It was a problem, but a larger problem was the lack of understanding of what the Nazis would do to the huge and powerful workers movement; this, together with a mistrust, certainly by the KPD, of the SPD and the leadership, some of whom had been involved in the murder of leading activists and KPD heroes, such as, Liebknecht and Luxemburg, hindered the left. Further, both parties, still beholden to many of the ideas of second international socialism, tended to see socialism as an historical certainty, rather than a potential outcome of historical ruptures. In summary, they were unwilling to engage in united activity against the Nazis. The tragedy is that these two left parties achieved together more votes in November 1932 (the last democratic election) than the Nazis and both were deeply embedded in both the workers movement in the factories and amongst the unemployed and both had sizeable militias. Their inability to jointly challenge the Nazis was one of the great tragedies of world history. That is not to say that together they would have stopped the Nazis, but rather that together they had the potential to do so.

Traverso titles his final chapter *The debt: the Warsaw ghetto uprising*. Traverso is a great admirer of the revolt, one of the most heroic moments in the Holocaust, what he

²⁵ CV Zeitung, 1933 p1

calls in an earlier work²⁶ ‘*the End of Jewish Modernity*’. I think the Warsaw ghetto uprising perhaps the greatest moment in Jewish, if not all, history. It is perhaps the last great moment of the Jewish Yiddishland, as Brossart and Klingberg call it²⁷. Marek Edelman was one of the Jewish Fighting Organisation leaders and a Bundist²⁸ leader and his *The Ghetto Fights* chronicles the events from an eye-witness perspective²⁹ and Traverso is a great admirer. It was an uprising with no hope of success, which had at its core a moral and ethical mission. Interestingly, Traverso points out the leadership of the JFO was a mix of Zionist and socialist organisations, their point of agreement being that all Jews, regardless of their political outlook, would end in Auschwitz. Traverso puts the lessons of the uprising beautifully and suggests what we have to do:

The ghetto fighters left us a universal message of humanism and hope...People do not revolt only when they have a chance of winning; they revolt because they cannot accept an insult to human dignity...Now it is up to us to put the therapeutic virtues of memory to work³⁰.

We need to transform these words into action. As racism and fascism and right wing populism continue their growth across the world, the task of the left is to build the largest possible united front movement of Jews, Muslims, Roma, Afro Caribbeans, other ethnic groups, trade unions and leftist political organisations against them.

²⁶ Traverso, 2016

²⁷ Brossart and Klingberg, 2016

²⁸ The Bund was the shortened name for the General Jewish Labour League in Lithuania, Poland and Russia.

²⁹ Edelman, 1945

³⁰ Traverso, 2019 p267

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