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Cultural Trauma, Biopolitics and the Limits of Responsibility

Allen Meek
Massey University

This essay develops a critique of cultural trauma narratives that assign responsibility for collective suffering and foster identification with the different roles of perpetrator, bystander and victim as actors in an historical drama. Conceptions of trauma are produced by medical and therapeutic discourses about individuals and societies and form part of what Foucault, Agamben and others call biopolitics. Biopolitics is a form of power that monitors, controls and enhances the lives of populations and species and decides which forms of life should survive and which can be destroyed. Modern catastrophes—such as the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, or the 9/11 attacks—are often described as ‘traumatic’, but there is a contradiction between the humanist rhetoric of cultural trauma narratives and the extreme forms of technological destruction and dehumanizing violence that define these events. The essay contrasts the claims of Alexander, who proposes that the Holocaust has achieved the status of ‘moral universal’, with first-hand accounts of the Nazi camps by Bettelheim and Levi and commentaries by Arendt and Agamben, all of whom argue that in so-called totalitarian societies the possibility of individual responsibility is fundamentally undermined. The essay shows how the construction of the Holocaust as a trauma narrative has failed to address the ways that modern biopolitics has complicated individual and collective responsibility.

Introduction

The belief that an entire nation or ethnic group can share a traumatic past is widely espoused today. The most internationally prominent example of such a cultural trauma is, of course, the Jewish Holocaust, although other examples include the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, various colonial genocides, African slavery and the 9/11 attacks. In some of these cases—and, again, particularly in the case

of the Holocaust—claims have been made that this trauma affects not only specific ethnic and national groups who identify with the victims, but all of humanity. Cultural trauma implies that a community has experienced an event that has shattered their most fundamental sense of security. This experience of actual or threatened destruction prompts a desire to locate the source of the threat and to identify the individuals or groups responsible for the assault. One of the central concerns of narratives about the traumatic past is to assign responsibility for suffering. The historical events that are called traumatic, however, often raise complex questions about the limits and even the very possibility of moral responsibility.

The term trauma originates in medicine and was later adopted by psychology. It implies a physical or psychical injury requiring a therapeutic intervention that diagnoses, analyzes and seeks to repair the wounded body or mind. Such interventions of knowledge and power at the level of biological life play an important role in what Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and others have called biopolitics. Biopolitics is concerned with the health, survival and destruction of human populations. This modern form of power erodes and over-rides earlier distinctions between private life and political participation because the most intimate aspects of individual life become the source of information that is related to broader trends in a population. Populations can become identified with particular kinds of psychological responses, such as shock or grief, to the point where individual agency is suspended or eradicated. For example, after the 9/11 attacks the American public was surveyed to measure levels of traumatisation (Marshall et al. 2007; Neria 2011). The accumulation, archiving and analysis of information about responses to catastrophe forms part of a biopolitical apparatus that seeks to monitor, control and enhance human life. Cultural trauma narratives also play their role in this apparatus of power by assigning a collective psychological response to the general population. These narratives over-ride individual political agency by subsuming individual responses into a narrative about collective identity understood in psycho-biological terms.

The notion of a community defined by a shared memory of catastrophe and suffering at first appears to reproduce older beliefs in sacrifice and martyrdom: for example, the soldier who gives his life to preserve the nation whose sovereignty is, in turn, based on a God-given sanctity. But the events that are usually spoken of as cultural traumas—such as genocide, technological warfare and terrorism—do not always make sense in terms of the beliefs and ideals of national or religious communities. The victims and survivors of these modern catastrophes were often unable to risk or give their lives to save others: their common fate was to belong to human populations designated for destruction by forces well beyond their control. Cultural trauma narratives tell about events, such as the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, or the 9/11 attacks, in which human populations were destroyed in ways that completely overwhelmed both individual and collective agency. They are ‘traumatic’ because

they confront us with extreme forms of technological destruction and dehumanizing violence.

Cultural trauma narratives assign responsibility for the suffering of specific communities by dramatizing historical events in ways that allow readers or audiences to identify with acts of heroism or villainy and to empathize with innocent victims. These narratives bring together individual experiences of distress and grief as a means of restoring a sense of common experience and moral order. By assigning the different roles of perpetrator and victim, bystander and witness, these narratives also create spaces of identification. They create a new political community by incorporating physical and psychological suffering: the wounded bodies and minds of individual bodies compose a larger, traumatised body politic. Because they make the biological lives and deaths of human populations the basis of membership in a society, cultural trauma narratives are biopolitical.

In the following discussion I consider the relation between some contemporary theories of cultural trauma and biopolitics as different responses to the extreme events of the Nazi genocide. I consider how cultural trauma has been universalized in the work of contemporary theorists such as Jeffrey Alexander and Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider. They see the Holocaust as constitutive of new moral paradigms and transnational identities. Michael Rothberg has also shown how discourses about the Holocaust are historically interwoven with those about European colonialism and anti-colonial struggles. I contrast these attempts to universalize the significance of the Holocaust with some specific accounts by survivors. First I discuss Bruno Bettelheim's claims about the destruction of individual autonomy and agency in the camps. I conclude by discussing Primo Levi's meditation on the significance of the *muselmann* and members of the *Sonderkommando* as individuals who inhabited the 'gray zone' in the Nazi camps where moral responsibility for one's actions became impossible. Cultural trauma has become the basis of globalized theories of history and memory but, I will argue, the experience of the 'gray zone' does not easily serve as a basis for shared identity and the attribution of responsibility.

The Two Paradigms: Cultural Trauma and Biopolitics

Cultural trauma should not be understood in any straightforward sense as designating a collective psychological experience. Research reveals that most people do not develop trauma symptoms even when exposed to conditions sufficient to cause Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Young 2007, p. 21). The diagnosis of psychological trauma has nevertheless been extended to larger claims about cultural beliefs and historical events. As early as *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud related trauma to forms of collective psychic repression. In his final work *Moses and Monotheism* (1930), Freud explained Judaism in terms of the trauma of monotheistic faith. Freud also explained political violence in terms of a deeper 'traumatic' social memory; i.e.

societies attempt to release themselves from collective feelings of guilt and anxiety by expelling or killing 'alien' individuals and groups. This conception of historical trauma reached its culmination in Theodor Adorno's (1973) often-cited postwar comments about the fate of culture 'after Auschwitz'. Adorno argued that the Western philosophical conception of Enlightenment was shattered by the reduction of human individuals in the camps to disposable objects. For Freud and Adorno trauma formed part of a philosophical and political critique of collective identity and violence.

A second conceptualisation of cultural trauma appeared in postwar America with reference to the bombing of Hiroshima, the Holocaust and the Vietnam War. In America the Freudian theory of unconscious historical trauma merged with psycho-therapeutic research on survivors of war and catastrophe. Robert Jay Lifton's studies of Hiroshima survivors and Vietnam veterans prompted him to generalize about the larger American society in terms of 'psychic numbing' (1967, p. 14) regarding the ongoing threat of collective annihilation. This extension of the therapeutic model to large populations made trauma more overtly biopolitical. In the 1960s and 70s the legacies of slavery, racism, war, domestic violence and rape were central concerns of the civil rights, anti-war, feminism and gay liberation struggles. Struggle was articulated through speaking out, breaking the silence surrounding prejudice and abuse, and giving testimony to the suffering experienced by oppressed individuals and groups. In these social movements trauma came to signify a sense of cultural participation and belonging. This cultural conception of trauma then crossed over into literary criticism, leading, in the 1990s to the emergence of trauma studies. Shoshanna Felman's and Dori Laub's *Testimony* (1992) was the first text to mix literary analysis, psychotherapy with Holocaust survivors, and film and video texts. This book became a defining text for academic trauma studies and established a tendency to look for authentic representations of trauma in serious literature and film or in testimonial documents.

The more recent adoption of trauma as a concept in sociology has involved shedding its psychological and literary associations and revealing its more overtly political aspects. In *Trauma: A Social Theory* (2012), Jeffrey Alexander proposes that narratives of cultural trauma are constructed by individuals and groups who wield symbolic power and influence. What is most original about Alexander's account of cultural trauma is his shift from a focus on the psychically disruptive impact of catastrophic events to the active construction of trauma as a social process. He rejects what he calls Enlightenment trauma theory, which situates catastrophe in narratives of recovery and social progress, and psychoanalysis, which diagnoses symptomatic responses to trauma in forgetting and compulsive repetition. Both of these accounts, he argues, attribute a traumatic status to particular events. Instead, he suggests, we need to understand the ways in which trauma is always embedded in social processes of imagination and representation. Cultural trauma narratives tell of disruptions of collective identity, provide explanations about the nature of pain

experienced by a particular group, and attribute responsibility for social suffering.

In his eagerness to leave behind the baggage of psychoanalysis, however, Alexander fails to address the medico-scientific conceptions of trauma that ground it in biopolitics. The term trauma was first used in medical discourse to refer to an injury or wound. The medical treatment of trauma is based on physical evidence of damage to the body. Psychological trauma, first diagnosed in the late nineteenth century, worked from physical symptoms and behaviors to hypothesize an unseen or forgotten mental cause or origin. To formulate a cultural trauma narrative is to extend this diagnosis from an individual to a specific group or entire society. This requires imagining societies, like individuals or families, as disturbed by undisclosed secrets or unacknowledged injuries. The treatment—advocated by psychotherapists, cultural critics, media commentators and politicians—is to patiently uncover these wounds, to try to understand their causes and effects, and hopefully to heal them.

The concept of biopolitics allows us to consider trauma narratives and collective identity from a different perspective. Biopolitics was first formulated by Foucault (2003) to describe a new form of power emerging in the nineteenth century in which large populations were conceived as biological entities or species. Before this, societies had been organized around orders of sovereignty, such as monarchy, or through disciplinary regimes such as those used in religion, schooling and the military. Biopolitics extends the knowledge-power nexus to include the health and survival of entire populations by recording data and preserving knowledge in archives, conducting demographic research, analyzing statistical norms and classifying biological life forms. Foucault only briefly mentioned (in the closing pages of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*) genocide and nuclear weapons as extreme manifestations of this new form of power (1998, p. 137). The legacy of Nazi biopolitics, however, is central to Agamben's continuing research in this area.

Agamben argues that biopolitics originates in structures of sovereign power that determine who has the right to live, or who qualifies as human. He has explicitly connected biopolitics with modern totalitarian states and, more specifically, the Nazi Final Solution. The reduction of human populations to a state of 'bare life' that leaves individuals and groups available to be killed at will, finds its definitive expression in the death camp. Agamben explicitly rejects the suggestive notion of a 'parallelism between internal and external neuroses' (1998, p. 6)—that is, cultural trauma. He also argues that while the modern conception of the sacredness of life originates in the subjection of life to sovereign power, today it is 'completely emancipated from sacrificial ideology' (1998, p. 114). For this reason, Agamben rejects the term 'Holocaust' to describe the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews.

Agamben proposes that 'the politicization of bare life ... constitutes the decisive event of modernity' (1998, p. 4). In the classical world natural life was not conceived as part of the *polis* but belonged to the private sphere (*oikos*). The figure of *homo sacer* (from ancient Roman law) is available to be killed but not sacrificed. In modern biopolitics the distinction between bare life and political life has become increasingly blurred: *homo sacer*, once a marginal figure, has become the prototype for a general condition. Agamben argues that modern democracies have extended sovereign power through the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the post World War II discourse of human rights. At the same time as they claim to protect and safeguard life these declarations and discourses have drawn life further into the domain of sovereign power.

Is today's rhetoric of cultural trauma a biopolitics by other means—now formulated in the language of humanist empathy and moral universals? Just as human rights are bound to the structures of sovereign power that define who counts and who does not count as human, so the humanist discourse of cultural trauma reproduces forms of national and ethnic identity premised on valuing one set of lives over others. Medical and legal discourses and institutions organize life in terms of biopolitical categories that undermine the claims of universal humanism. Psychological and cultural discourses about trauma manifest all of these ambiguities and contradictions. In *The Empire of Trauma* (2009), Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman argue that before the Vietnam War, combat trauma was usually treated with suspicion and seen as cowardice. Since the official recognition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, however, victim-hood as a legitimate form of identity has become almost universally accepted. With the branding of the 9/11 attacks as a national trauma for Americans and the ongoing research on the psychological repercussions of the attacks for the general population, cultural trauma has been aligned in new ways with what Foucault called the 'medical gaze' (1994, p.14). What appears as empathy for collective suffering also defines populations in terms of collective pathologies and their capacity for resilience. The events from which these traumas supposedly originate, however, often complicate fundamental distinctions between victim and perpetrator, human non-human. In the next section I pursue these problems further with specific reference to the construction of the Holocaust as a cultural trauma and the crisis of individual responsibility witnessed in the Nazi camps.

The Holocaust as Cultural Trauma

The proliferation of Holocaust histories, testimonies, dramatisations and fictionalisations has fostered a range of possible identifications with victims, survivors, bystanders and perpetrators. The Holocaust is claimed to be a trauma for the Jews and for Israel but also for Poland and Germany, for the West and even all humanity. But there are conflicting and contradictory tendencies in this drive to identify with the experience of the Holocaust in which large groups were killed and

individuals often reduced to the most rudimentary forms of survival. The iconic cultural trauma of the twentieth century—the Holocaust—is also the most extreme instance of modern biopolitics. The Nazi genocide was the most highly organized and deliberate instance of killing large human populations justified by a biological theory of race. The victims were defined as ‘subhuman’, deprived of national citizenship and civil rights, incarcerated, enslaved, worked to death or killed outright. Human individuals were reduced to disposable objects or to pure biopower—even their body fat and hair was recycled. In the face of this radical destruction of individuality and agency, cultural trauma narratives can be seen as compensatory: they allow spaces of identification that fill the vacuum left by the actual destruction of the political subject. But by assigning responsibility for suffering to particular individuals and groups they can fail to address larger questions about the altered nature of political responsibility in modern societies. In the case of the Nazi Final Solution the question of responsibility was complicated for both victims and perpetrators.

To say that an individual or group suffers trauma implies feelings of loss, disorientation, outrage, and indignation that require compensatory acts of mourning, commemoration, and retribution. But the events that are recalled may have been characterized by moral ambiguity and ethical uncertainty—indeed this may be an underlying reason for their ‘traumatic’ status. The difficulty in assigning blame in such ambiguous and uncertain circumstances can lead to problems in achieving psychological or symbolic closure. Beyond moral ambiguity lies the much larger terrain of institutional hierarchies, bureaucratic processes and technological systems that make it difficult to assign responsibility to specific individuals or groups because their actions form only a small part of complex social and political operations. The transformation of the nature of power in modern societies has complicated our understanding of moral agency and responsibility.

Much of this was already grasped by Hannah Arendt in her controversial book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). She criticized the prosecution in the Eichmann trial for building a case ‘on what the Jews had suffered, not on what Eichmann had done’ (p. 4). Arendt argued that the trial was a spectacle staged (by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion) for an international audience that aimed to teach the world about the evils of anti-Semitism and to teach a new generation of Jews to identify with their tragic history:

The logic of the Eichmann trial, as Ben-Gurion conceived of it, with its stress on general issues to the detriment of legal niceties, would have demanded exposure of the complicity of all German offices and authorities in the Final Solution—of all civil servants in the state ministries, of the regular armed forces, with their General Staff, of the judiciary, of the business world. But although the prosecution as conducted by Mr Hauser went as far afield as to put witness after witness on the stand who testified to things that, while gruesome and true enough, had no or only the slightest connection with the deeds of the accused, it carefully avoided touching upon this highly

explosive matter—upon the most ubiquitous complicity, which had stretched far beyond the ranks of Party membership. (Arendt 1963, p. 15)

The problem, as Arendt saw it, was not whether Eichmann was guilty—he clearly was—but that he was put on trial for the sufferings of all Jews and for this he was not responsible. In her essay ‘Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship’ Arendt argued that when an individual serves a criminal organisation it is not a valid excuse to later claim to have only been following orders. The individual must accept responsibility for criminal acts. In a totalitarian society only those who withdraw from public office can avoid becoming complicit in the crimes of the state. The criminal act is no longer the exception but the rule. The Nazi state ordered the deaths of millions of innocent people and carrying out these orders became a normal law-abiding act. In this way the totalitarian state attempted to destroy the capacity of the individual to make an independent moral decision or judgment.

The Eichmann trial functioned as what Jeffrey Alexander has called a ‘trauma drama’ (2009, p. 34): it presented innocent victims and dramatized their sufferings and it identified an evil perpetrator responsible for this suffering. The purpose of this drama was to (re)establish the collective identity of a specific group (the Jews), but according to Arendt it failed to clarify more complex issues about legal culpability or moral responsibility. A year after the appearance of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Susan Sontag published an essay in which she claimed that the mass murder of the European Jews was ‘the supreme tragic event of modern times’, an event that ‘no one understands’, and that it was ‘a wound that will not heal’ (1966, p. 124). Sontag compared the Eichmann trial to a ‘tragic drama’ (1966, p. 126) but, unlike Arendt who criticized the staging of the trial for its spectacle of Jewish suffering, Sontag affirmed this ‘tragic’ presentation of the event as unavoidable and justified—even if it contradicted the legal purpose of the trial. Sontag’s essay was symptomatic of the way in which cultural trauma narratives are able to obscure the political, legal and moral problems of responsibility raised by Arendt.

The Eichmann trial treated the Nazi Final Solution as an episode in a long history of anti-Semitic persecution and pogroms. Arendt argued that the real issue raised by the trial was ‘the unprecedented crime of genocide’ (1963, p. 245), which was ‘an attack upon human diversity as such’ (1963, p. 247). Eichmann was tried and executed in Israel for crimes against the Jewish people but Arendt argued that he should have been tried, following the precedent set by the Nuremberg Trials, for crimes against humanity. Agamben has taken Arendt’s work as pioneering the analysis of modern biopolitics (1998, pp. 3-4) but he disagrees with her on this point. He proposes that the concentration camp represents the exemplary biopolitical space because those it imprisons are excluded from civil rights and from humanity itself (1998, p. 166). In *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben argues—contra Arendt—that in the case of the Nazi Final Solution the trials for crimes

against humanity did not provide adequate understanding of the extreme nature of the events which put the very concept of the human in question. The notion of 'crimes against humanity' assumes a human subject with independent moral agency. In the Third Reich, however, moral agency was overtaken by the biopolitics of race which determined who was fit to live and who should die.

Agamben cites what Primo Levi called the 'gray zone' in the Nazi camps, in which distinctions between victims and perpetrators became blurred, as establishing a 'zone of irresponsibility' (2002, p. 21). Because the inmates of the camps were defined in biopolitical terms as subhuman, they were also placed outside the realm of human moral responsibility. The most widely discussed example of Levi's 'gray zone' is the *Sonderkommando*, a unit composed of camp inmates who worked in the gas chambers in order to survive. Levi's and Agamben's meditations on this 'zone of irresponsibility' (which I will return to later in this essay) can be set alongside Arendt's claim that Eichmann constituted a new type of criminal who 'commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong' (1963, p. 253). In the Final Solution both victim and perpetrator entered a new 'gray zone' of responsibility: the prisoner because s/he was often deprived of individual agency and the perpetrator because s/he behaved as a law-abiding citizen in a murderous state.

This does not mean, however, that the problem of responsibility was the same for the victim and the perpetrator. Levi proposed that we must suspend judgment on those victims—such as the *Sonderkommando*—who survived by accepting the terms of the 'gray zone'. Arendt, on the other hand, was confident that we must judge Eichmann, along with his colleagues in the Nazi apparatus of genocide, as guilty of criminal acts. Agamben does not engage the question of judgment because he sees it as juridical rather than ethical. His interest is in the changing nature of power that determined these historical situations. Agamben's discussions of Nazism and the camps ask us to see these problems of responsibility pertaining to both perpetrators and victims as symptoms of modern biopolitics. In the extreme situation of the Nazi state, he argues, all individual responsibility was replaced by the biological imperative of race: the Aryan master race needed to survive and all subhuman races needed to perish. This biological imperative meant that individuals in the Nazi state no longer had any moral responsibility for the well-being or survival of 'inferior races'. For the victims of racial persecution and genocide, the struggle for biological survival sometimes overtook their ability to act as independent moral agents.

Agamben's meditations on the camps depart from some of the more prevalent ideas about responsibility and the legacies of the Holocaust, for example Alexander's claim that cultural trauma narratives allow groups to assume moral responsibility for the suffering of others or to assign blame for suffering to another group. For Alexander this

process allows for the establishment of universal moral principles. Alexander's account of cultural trauma, which I will consider in further detail, does not acknowledge the problem identified by Arendt that bureaucratic states allow individuals to evade responsibility for their acts or Agamben's argument that those who are excluded from the status of full citizenship or humanity are thereby placed outside the zone of responsibility.

The Holocaust as Moral Universal

In his essay 'The Social Construction of Moral Universals', Alexander asks how the specific historical events of the Nazi mass murder of the Jews became transformed into 'a generalized symbol of human suffering and moral evil' (2009, p. 3). This transformation, Alexander proposes, was enabled by redefining the experiences of a particular group as a 'traumatic event for all humankind' (2009, p. 3). Alexander explains that after the Allied liberation of the Nazi concentration camps in 1945 the crimes against the Jews were considered as further examples of war atrocities, comparable to Japanese brutality toward prisoners of war. The fate of the Jewish victims, he writes, 'did not itself become a traumatic experience for the audience toward which the mass media's collective representations were transmitted' (2009, p. 5). This failure to transmit the trauma of the victims and survivors to the wider public was due to an absence of 'symbolic extension and psychological identification' (2009, p. 5). The victims tended to be represented as depersonalized and the survivors as dehumanized. Although he does not say so directly, Alexander's argument implies that the extreme application of biopolitics by the Nazi state had destroyed the basis of moral agency and replaced shared identification on moral grounds with membership in a racial community.

The defining of the Holocaust as a trauma was a 'complex cultural construction' (2009, p. 9) and morally coded as 'evil' over a period of decades. The rhetorical branding of Nazism as evil in Britain and America was a central justification for the war. According to what Alexander calls the 'progressive narrative' (2009, p. 10), the determination to overcome the Nazi threat, elevated to the status of moral universal, also prohibited anti-Semitic persecution. The next stage of universalisation was the Nuremberg Trials and the invention of 'crimes against humanity' (2009, p. 19). Alexander claims that the Nazi crimes 'did not create trauma for the postwar audience' (2009, p. 19) because of the pervading climate of optimism in America. For Alexander the progressive narrative later gave way to the 'tragic' narrative, which 'provided the basis for psychological identification on an unprecedented scale' (2009, p. 32). Alexander sees this narrativisation as a positive development insofar as it extended the possibilities of psychological identification and stimulated 'an unprecedented universalisation of political and moral responsibility' (2009, p. 35), thereby redeeming the tragic, pessimistic turn that Holocaust narratives had taken.

What is at stake in Alexander's account is the necessity of collective identification with the victim in order for cultural trauma narratives to take hold. Because most Americans did not identify with the Jews or the survivors of the camps but with their own victory over Germany, the Holocaust did not initially become part of the collective imagination. The de-legitimizing of anti-Semitism in the post war period, and the assimilation of Jews into mainstream American culture, gradually established more favorable conditions for identifying with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. In the 1960s and 70s the Holocaust narrative began to take on 'tragic' dimensions as the Holocaust became symbolic of a mysterious and inexplicable evil. This led to claims that the Holocaust could not be represented at all, or only in unconventional ways. Another way to understand this transition, however, is that the *impossibility* of identification with the victims remained an impasse for cultural trauma narratives and so gave rise to a negative symbolisation. Working against the recognition of Nazi dehumanisation, mass media produced a number of popular narratives, such as the television miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) and the award-winning film *Schindler's List* (1995), that allowed viewers to experience emotional and cultural identification with the Jews as victims.

One of the reasons that the Holocaust became such a commonly used moral reference point in American public discourse was the pervasive influence of mass media. Unlike Europe, with its material remnants and living survivors of the World War Two era, Americans learned about the Holocaust primarily through television. The horrors of the Nazi death camps were first revealed to the American public through news photographs and newsreels which were used in numerous television documentaries in subsequent decades. The first extended television coverage of the Holocaust in America was the Eichmann trial in 1961, which became an occasion for what Jeffrey Shandler calls the 'self-conscious performance of the past' (1999, p. 104) as being of 'historical' significance. The notion of witnessing history, he argues, was presented as a 'morally transformative experience' (1999, p. 104). Eichmann's physical appearance at the trial was loaded with moral significance as he was seen to embody the historical crimes of anti-Semitism.

This dramatisation of the Holocaust has since become a feature of global media. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider propose that today the Holocaust has 'become a measure for humanist and universal identifications' (2006, p. 4) even for those with no direct connection to the historical events themselves. They argue that while the collective memory of ethnic and national groups is often seen as a means of resisting globalisation, transnational forms of collective memory are beginning to emerge: new cosmopolitan memory cultures, formed through the interconnection between universal values and local cultures. Global popular culture is the medium of this new humanism. Levy and Sznaider, however, base their claims largely on three case studies of the Holocaust and collective memory: in the United States, Germany and Israel. These nations form part of a hegemonic

formation of power and wealth in the contemporary global economy. They argue that in a new global cosmopolitan culture more people identify with the dislocated, diasporic experience of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

Taking a less benign view of contemporary identity politics, Michael Rothberg writes of a 'competition of victims' (2009, p. 2) in which different ethnic groups vie for public recognition of their own histories of oppression. Rothberg proposes moving away from this competitive model of collective memory and adopting instead a 'multidirectional' model. As opposed to competitive memory, in which there can only be winners and losers, multidirectional memory is productive and intercultural. The Holocaust remains at the center of this struggle for recognition but has also played an important role in the articulation of other histories of violence and oppression, particularly those of colonialism. He is critical of arguments that stress the uniqueness of the Holocaust in ways that perpetuate a 'hierarchy of suffering' (2009, p. 9). Rothberg's more flexible account of cultural trauma nonetheless still universalizes the Holocaust. While a more diverse range of groups can stake their claim to the historical significance ascribed to the Holocaust, they cannot speak for those who were excluded from humanity altogether. How can the experience of the dehumanized subject serve as the basis for a shared traumatic memory? This would involve extending identification beyond any ethnic, national or civil community. Multidirectional memory remains a notion of cultural trauma that fails to address the biopolitical *caesura* that defines the limits of the human.

There are other obvious objections to be made against all of these arguments for a universalisation of the Holocaust. The use of the Holocaust as a reference point for other historical events, such as African slavery or the Native American genocide, is not only about competing identity politics but also about deeply contested understandings of European imperialism and colonialism. Nor is it clear that specific national and ethnic groups are so willing to give up their local identity and identify with Jewish cosmopolitanism, despite the prominence of the Holocaust in global popular culture. Rather it seems more likely that events such as the Holocaust can become separated from their historical particularity because they can be translated into easily-consumed narrative formulas that invite emotional investment and identification with the position of innocent victim.

These different attempts to establish universal moral principles on the basis of identification with Holocaust narratives all fail to address more fundamental problems of human agency raised by biopolitics. In the following section I turn to two accounts of the camps by survivors who explain, in different ways, this problem of agency and responsibility. I propose that the 'trauma' of the camps originates precisely in the inability to identify with the victims reduced to a state of what Agamben has called 'bare life' and that identification with the victims

and the construction of moral universals is actually the denial of the dehumanizing experience of the camps. Two accounts of the experience of the Nazi camps, by Bruno Bettelheim and Primo Levi, are particularly interesting for the ways that they address the question of moral responsibility and (implicitly) biopolitics.

The Informed Heart

Bruno Bettelheim spent his formative years in Vienna and his intellectual positions were shaped by psychoanalysis. His experiences in the concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald forced him to confront the radical influence of social environment on behavior. In the extreme conditions of the camp he observed that an individual's personality, supposedly formed through family relations, was forced to change in order to survive. In this situation the psychoanalytic account of the individual, stressing his unconscious impulses and inner conflicts, seemed to him 'ludicrously beside the point' and 'shockingly short of the mark' (1986, p. 17). In extreme situations the individual was defined by acts rather than psychological depth. Bettelheim generalized from the experience of the camp to argue that in modern societies, where change is rapid, it is no longer possible to explain the individual solely in terms of deep psychological structures.

Faced with a complex political system, impersonal bureaucracy and advanced technology, modern individuals experience a loss of autonomy. This feeling of individual powerlessness was also a crucial component of totalitarian power. The individual surrendered all power to the political system and to those who controlled it. In totalitarian societies, the exaggerated claims made by the state for its uniqueness and superiority—whether racial, cultural or ideological—served to compensate for the destruction of the individual's actual autonomy. The reduction of freedom achieved its absolute form in the extermination camps where individuals were deprived of even the possibility of taking their own life. The camps were an 'experimental laboratory' (1986, p. 110) in which the SS were trained in the most effective means of destroying all human resistance and extracting labor with minimum sustenance and life support.

Bettelheim proposed that 'What happened in the concentration camp suggests that under conditions of extreme deprivation, the influence of the environment over the individual can become total' (1986, p. 147). Those who fatalistically surrendered to the environment were known in the camps as 'moslems' (*Muselmänner*) (1986, p. 151). They acted as if they had no feelings and no personal autonomy. They behaved like automatons who blindly followed orders. And when they could no longer do even this they died:

Thus the truly extreme environment first blocks self-stimulated action (resisting or modifying the environment) and later also, response to any stimulus coming from the environment in terms of one's own personality (inner revulsion without overt action based on it). Finally, all this is replaced by no other than environment

imposed action without even an inner personal response to it. This last situation leads first to a blotting out of responses, later to a blotting out even of perception; except that death then follows. (Bettelheim 1986, p. 156)

In the final stage the *muselmann* could no longer respond even to the stimulus of food.

Submission to the reign of terror required that the individual also submit to the survival of the group because any assertion of individual resistance would bring punishment down on fellow prisoners. According to Bettelheim survival often involved regression to a childlike state of dependency and the inability to sustain any sense of past or future. Relationships of mutual trust and support disappeared. Dependence on authoritarian power for survival led to a degeneration of the capacity for independent thought. Thinking became automaton-like. In Bettelheim's view this transformation of individual humans into unthinking machines was not confined only to the prisoners but also to those who administered the camp. Bettelheim wrote of Rudolf Hoess, commandant of Auschwitz:

While his physical death came later, he became a living corpse from the time he assumed command of Auschwitz. That he never became a "moslem" was because he continued to be well fed and well clothed. But he had to divest himself so entirely of self respect and self love, of feeling and personality, that for all practical purposes he was little more than a machine functioning only as his superiors flicked the buttons of command. (Bettelheim 1986, p. 238)

Bettelheim proposed that the goal of the Nazi system was depersonalisation 'with the extermination policy only one of its logical consequences' (1986, p. 234). In the concentration camps 'the theoretical nonexistence of the individual' (1986, p. 240) was systematically applied. Torture and death became the pure expression of power that was oblivious to individuality. The human person became a disposable commodity.

By understanding both the plight of the inmates and the behavior of the administrators of the camps as determined by a larger logic of depersonalisation, Bettelheim addressed the new form of power that Foucault, Agamben and others call biopolitics. Although his analysis of life in the camps was psychological, Bettelheim argued that individuals were overwhelmed by the effect of the environment. Individual behavior was reduced from independent agency to a form of life that was either allowed or prohibited by the state. There was no longer a distinction between private individuals and social existence. Life and death were decided by political power in every feature of the world of the camps.

This overtaking of individual psychology by power over life and death also made ineffectual the attempts to assign responsibility after the

fact. Bettelheim argued that the Allied armies of occupation were psychologically misguided when they forced German civilians to witness the horrors of the camps. Instead of prompting citizens to take moral responsibility for the crimes of the state, it only confirmed their fear of total domination: 'Probably the major impact of seeing the horrors was to show them how right they had been in the first place in not daring to expose the Gestapo' (1986, p. 287). Bettelheim's position is directly contrary to subsequent cultural theories that stress the idea of collective guilt:

One of the major conditions for the independent existence of the individual is his personal responsibility for his acts. When we select a group of German citizens, show them the concentration camps, and say to them 'You are guilty', we are affirming a fascist tenet. Whoever accepts the doctrine of the guilt of a whole people helps to destroy the development of a true democracy which is based on individual autonomy and responsibility. (Bettelheim 1986, p. 288)

The true psychological insight, Bettelheim proposed, was that unconscious awareness of, and anxiety about, the reality of the camps demanded conscious denial in order to function. The Allies demanded that the Germans accept collective moral responsibility but this very possibility had been destroyed by the experience of totalitarian power. Alexander's notion of the Holocaust as a 'moral universal' repeats this psychological error. It bestows the moral 'high ground' on the Allied victors while failing to account for the historical subversion of individual agency and responsibility in mass societies.

The Gray Zone

Primo Levi's meditations on his experience of Auschwitz in *The Drowned and the Saved* also address the problem of dehumanisation and the destruction of individual responsibility. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben proposes that what Primo Levi called the 'gray zone' in Auschwitz established a space 'that is independent of every establishment of responsibility' (2002, p. 21). This was the zone in which prisoners were forced to cooperate in the process of extermination in order to survive. The Nazi camps were the purest expression of the state of emergency declared in Germany in 1933 by which absolute power was invested in Hitler as the head of state. In Auschwitz the absence of individual rights and the complete subjection to the authority of the law became the condition of everyday life. The extreme victim of the camps was the *muselmann* who descended to a condition of living death: he marked 'the threshold between the human and the inhuman' (2002, p. 55). The biological racism that defined the Jews and other groups as subhuman produced the *muselmann* as a limit case of dehumanisation. When the prisoners were liberated they became human again, returning them to conditions that made possible moral agency and responsibility. But in the camps, in the gray zone, the prisoner was not considered human and was not responsible. The *muselmann* was thus 'the site of an experiment in which morality and

humanity themselves are called into question' (2002, p. 63). Ethical limits lost their meaning in the extreme situation of the camps. Modern biopolitics produces new categories of life in which entire populations are excluded from the human species and thereby excluded from human-centered conceptions of dignity and responsibility. In the place of guilt, the prisoner in the Nazi camps experienced a new kind of shame at his/her survival, his/her reduction to mere biological existence.

In *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi argued that it was necessary to make careful distinctions between different categories of prisoners and levels in the camp hierarchy and to consider the relation between the Nazi political system and civilian populations when attempting to assign moral and historical responsibility. The urgency of bearing witness to the experience of the camps was complicated by the larger system of power within which both perpetrator and victim existed. Those who were responsible for the exterminations, wrote Levi, 'had compelling reasons to be silent' (1988, p. 4). If and when they did speak they attempted to deny individual responsibility for their actions because the system in which they functioned did not allow for autonomous decisions. This put further onus on the survivors to testify to the truth of what happened. The survivors of the camps, however, were limited in their perspective by their extreme deprivation and were often overwhelmed by the Nazi apparatus of enslavement and destruction. The 'privileged' witnesses, particularly those who had been political prisoners, endured less harsh conditions and could gain a better understanding of the camp organisation, but their testimony was compromised to the extent that they collaborated with their oppressors.

As for those who organized and administered the extermination process, Levi (like Arendt) does not accept that the pressures of surviving in a totalitarian state can excuse their crimes. Forgetting or revising one's memory of the past aids the perpetrators' denial of responsibility. But the victims also seek to escape their painful memories and often look for comfort in self-delusion. The responsibility to give truthful testimony is threatened by the unreliability of memory and the tendency to simplify experiences and make them familiar and comprehensible. Painful memories form a part of narratives that assign the roles of perpetrator and victim, separating evil from good. But the actual experience of the camps was more bewildering and disorienting. What Levi calls the 'gray zone' in which the prisoners in the camp participated in the system of violent oppression and destruction was 'enough to confuse our need to judge' (1988, p. 27):

It must be clear that the greatest responsibility lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state, the constant guilt on the part of the individual big and small collaborators ... is always difficult to evaluate. (Levi 1988, p. 28)

Those who actively pursued power and exercised violence against those under them should be held accountable but in the vast majority of cases in the camp extreme deprivation and the struggle to survive eliminated room for moral choice. Of the *Sonderkommando*, the Special Squads of prisoners who worked in the gas chambers, Levi writes that they 'represented an attempt to shift on to others—specifically the victims—the burden of guilt' (1988, p. 37). This was 'National Socialism's most demonic crime' (1988, p. 37) and 'no-one is authorized to judge them [the *Sonderkommando*]' (1988, p. 42). After the liberation, with the restoration of human agency and dignity, came feelings of guilt and shame for what the prisoners had done or not done in order to survive. The mere fact of surviving while others perished was enough to prompt feelings of guilt.

Levi's testimony is not easy to assimilate into arguments that erect moral universals on the basis of the Holocaust. The 'saved' would never be free of the experience of being excluded from the human community and being forced to survive on the terms of their persecutors. As Levi explains, the *muselmann* was the true witness:

We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority; we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the 'Muslims', the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. (Levi 1988, pp. 63-64)

Conclusion

Cultural trauma narratives foster identification with actors in an historical drama and on this basis assign different positions of moral responsibility for suffering to the different roles of perpetrator, bystander, witness, survivor and victim. Theories of biopolitics complicate this assignation of responsibility by arguing that extreme modern states like Nazi Germany radically transformed the conditions in which it was possible to behave as a morally responsible individual. This impacted on both perpetrators and victims of racial persecution and genocide. This perspective on modern politics, derived partly from the testimony of survivors of the Nazi camps and also from Arendt's pioneering attempts to understand the implications of totalitarianism, demand that we suspend identification with figures in the Holocaust drama and instead reflect on the changing nature of power and responsibility in modern societies.

This does not mean that no one is responsible for genocide and racial violence. But the bureaucratic apparatus of genocide and the experience of the 'gray zone' in the camps complicated the attribution of moral responsibility. Levi argues that responsibility for the Nazi crimes lies with the larger system of state power. Agamben proposes that this system is biopolitical, re-defining the limits of the human and thereby the limits of responsibility. As Arendt pointed out, however, a

system cannot be put on trial (Arendt 2003, p. 30). We should be wary, then, of deriving moral universals from the Holocaust and finding solace in identification with trauma dramas. Instead we need to address more fundamental problems of responsibility in modern societies and the implications of biopolitics for the destruction of freedom, autonomy and the true value of life.

Allen Meek is a senior lecturer in media studies at Massey University. He is the author of *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories and Images* (Routledge 2010) and *Biopolitical Media: Catastrophe, Immunity and Bare Life* (Routledge 2015). His research uses theories of biopolitics to understand the ways that modern catastrophes have been represented by the media and used to define collective memory and identity.

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