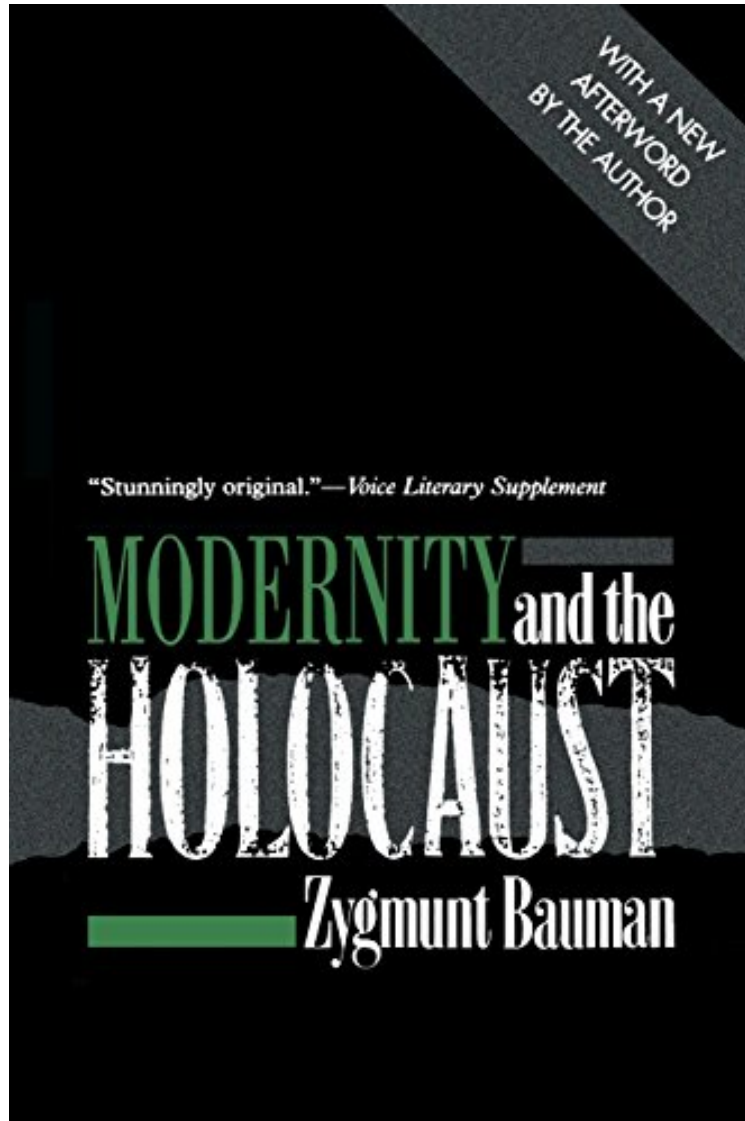


Modernity and the Holocaust

Zygmunt Bauman

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Zygmunt Bauman : Modernity and the Holocaust before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Modernity and the Holocaust:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. 'Science replaced God. It created a vacancy: the office of the supreme legislator-manager, was horrifyingly empty' By Clay Garner "Together with the new unheard-of potency of man-made technology came the impotence of self-limitations men imposed through the millennia upon their own mastery over nature and over each other: the notorious disenchantment of the world or, as Nietzsche put it, 'death of God'.'" (217) Technology killed god? What happened? "God meant, first and foremost, a limit to human potential: a

constraint, imposed by what man may do over what man could do and dare do. The assumed omnipotence of God drew a borderline over what man was allowed to do and to dare. Commandments limited the freedom of humans as individuals; but they also set limits to what humans together, as a society, could legislate; they presented the human capacity to legislate and manipulate the world's principles as being inherently limited.' Human 'science' has unlimited ability! Why listen to God? "Modern science, which displaced and replaced God, removed that obstacle. It also created a vacancy: the office of the supreme legislator-cum-manager, of the designer and administrator of the world order, was now horrifyingly empty. It had to be filled, or else ... God was dethroned, but the throne was still in one place." "The emptiness of the throne was throughout the modern era a standing and tempting invitation to visionaries and adventurers. The dream of an all-embracing order and harmony remained as vivid as ever, and it seemed now closer than ever, more than ever within human reach. It was now up to the mortal earthlings to bring it about and to secure its ascendancy." "God is not dead! Human society has just replaced him!" "The world turned into man's garden but only the vigilance of the gardener may prevent it from descending into the chaos of wilderness. It was now up to man and man alone to see to it that rivers flow in the right direction and that rain forests do not occupy the field where groundnuts should grow. It was now up to man and man alone to make sure that the strangers do not obscure the transparency of legislated order, that social harmony is not spoiled by obstreperous classes, that the togetherness of folk is not tainted by alien races. The classless society, the race-pure society, the Great Society were now the task of man –an urgent task, a life-and-death matter, a duty. The clarity of the world and human vocation, once guaranteed by God and now lost, had to be fast restored, this time by human acumen and on human responsibility (or is it irresponsibility?) alone." (217) This seems to me the key theme. Human society (human experts, human Reason) can do anything, solve any problem, fix any failure; this expectation supports Hitlerism, Stalinism, etc.. Modernity's belief in this ability. . .this power. . .this potential - makes our world profoundly unique.

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"In the years leading to the Final Solution the most trusted of the safeguards had been put to a test. They all failed –one by one, and all together. Perhaps the most spectacular was the failure of science –as a body of ideas, and as a network of institutions of enlightenment and training." (107)
Science failed! Why?
"The deadly potential of the most revered principles and accomplishments of modern science has been exposed. The emancipation of reason from emotions, of rationality from normative pressures, of effectiveness from ethics have been the battle-cries of science since its inception. Once implemented, however, they made science, and the formidable technological applications it spawned, into docile instruments in the hands of unscrupulous power. The dark and ignoble role which science played in the perpetuation of the Holocaust was both direct and indirect. Indirectly (though centrally to its general social function), science cleared the way to genocide through sapping the authority, and questioning the binding force, of all normative thinking, particularly that of religion and ethics." (107)
Removing moral thinking 'of religion and ethics'. Was not this a key sign of progress?
"Science looks back at its history as the long and victorious struggle of reason over superstition and irrationality. In as far as religion and ethics could not rationally legitimize the demands they made on human behaviour, they stood condemned and found their authority denied. As values and norms had been proclaimed immanently and irreparably subjective, instrumentality was left as the only field where the search for excellence was feasible. Science wanted to be value-free and took pride in being such. By institutional pressure and by ridicule, it silenced the preachers of morality. In the process, it made itself morally blind and speechless. It dismantled all the barriers that could stop it from co-operating, with enthusiasm and abandon, in designing the most effective and rapid methods of mass sterilization or mass killing; or from conceiving of the concentration camps' slavery as a unique and wonderful opportunity to conduct medical research for the advancement of scholarship and –of course –of mankind." (107)
What about academics?
"At best, the cult of rationality, institutionalized as modern science, proved impotent to prevent the state from turning into organized crime; at worst, it proved instrumental in bringing the transformation about. Its rivals, however, did not earn a higher score either. In their silence German academics had plenty of

companions. Most conspicuously, they were joined by the Churches –all of them.’’ (108) Professors and clergymen? All? “Silence in the face of the organized inhumanity was the only item on which the Churches, so often at loggerheads, found themselves in agreement. None of them attempted to reclaim its flouted authority. None of the Churches (as distinct from single, and mostly isolated churchmen) acknowledged its responsibility for deeds perpetrated in a country it claimed as its domain, and by people in its pastoral charge. (Hitler never left the Catholic Church; neither was he excommunicated.) None upheld its right to pass moral judgements on its flock and impose penitence on the wayward.’’ (108) Well. . . Jehovah’s Witnesses (Bible students) did resist as an organized religion. They are proud to proclaim their neutrality (refused to Hiel Hitler) and have no shame or guilt from that terrible time. This work is a searing indictment of the modern scientific, rational, national system. Bauman is writing as a warning against pride. The misuse of authority, the mistrust in reason, the misplaced confidence in political power, resonates throughout. The holocaust can reoccur. Who will be the victim? Writing is smooth without becoming banal. Erudite although avoiding obscurity. Great! No index. No photographs. (See also: “The Origins of Modern Science” by Sir Herbert Butterfield. Famous insight into the impact of science.) 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. For those of stout heart and gut By Pleaching Mr. Bauman; s approach to this subject is entirely new to me. His grasp of historical information is exceptional, and he ties it to sociological information very well. 2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Original, in-depth analysis of dangers of the modern worldview By Jesse Taylor This book is a very well-written, in-depth analysis of how the modern, “civilized” mindset enabled normal, everyday Germans (businessmen, professors, soldiers, journalists -- just like your average U.S. citizens) to either actively participate or stand by and do nothing while the leaders of their nation murdered millions of people (the vast majority of whom -- 14 million out of 20 million -- were political opponents, not Jews -- 6 out of 20 million). As the U.S. government is currently murdering millions of people over in the Middle East, everyday Americans are standing around -- either supporting it or doing nothing. For instance 2.5 million people died in the U.S. invasion of Vietnam, tens of thousands of people still die each year in Laos from all of the leftover cluster bombs dropped there by the U.S. (look up “laos plain of jars”), and over 2 million people (500,000 of whom are children) have died in Iraq since the first Persian Gulf War as a result of economic sanctions and U.S. aerial strikes (look up “madeline albright iraq sanctions”)--- this is just slightly under the number of Jews that the Nazi regime killed, and it’s only three of the U.S.’s dozens of wars that took place during the 20th century. This is the topic of this book -- what causes everyone to stand around and justify large scale, state sanctioned murder? Is it cowardice, cruelty, or something else?

A new afterword to this edition, “The Duty to Remember? But What?” tackles difficult issues of guilt and innocence on the individual and societal levels. Zygmunt Bauman explores the silences found in debates about the Holocaust, and asks what the historical facts of the Holocaust tell us about the hidden capacities of present-day life. He finds great danger in such phenomena as the seductiveness of martyrdom; going to extremes in the name of safety; the insidious effects of tragic memory; and efficient, “scientific” implementation of the death penalty. Bauman writes, “Once the problem of the guilt of the Holocaust perpetrators has been by and large settled . . . the one big remaining question is the innocence of all the rest? not the least the innocence of ourselves.” Among the conditions that made the mass extermination of the Holocaust possible, according to Bauman, the most decisive factor was modernity itself. Bauman’s provocative interpretation counters the tendency to reduce the Holocaust to an episode in Jewish history, or to one that cannot be repeated in the West precisely because of the progressive triumph of modern civilization. He demonstrates, rather, that we must understand the events of the Holocaust as deeply rooted in the very nature of modern society and in the central categories of modern social thought.

“A stunningly original set of reflections on racism, extermination, rationality, individual responsibility in criminal societies, and the sources of obedience and resistance.”? Voice Literary Supplement “Such is the concentrated brilliance of Modernity and the Holocaust that it is sure to find an appreciative audience in every field of research which touches on the Holocaust (or which has been touched by it). Above all, to those who still hold faith with the notions of civilization, progress, and reason, this book will sit alongside others which have challenged fundamental beliefs of our time.”? Times Literary Supplement “Intellectually rich and provocative. . . . This is a text which belongs in our classrooms as well as on our shelves. Exceptionally well written.”? Contemporary Sociology “A new afterword to this edition tackles difficult issues of guilt and innocence on the individual and societal levels.”? Shofar, Summer 2001, Vol. 19, No. 4 “This book is an intense scrutiny of the lengths to which haters sink in displaying their hostility to targeted victims of that malady sometimes called xenophobia.”? Rabbi Sam Silver. Indiana Jewish Post and Opinion. 8/22/01 About the Author Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017) was Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the Universities of Leeds and Warsaw. He is the author of many works including Legislators and Interpreters (Polity Press) and Modernity and Ambivalence (Polity Press). He was also awarded the Theodor W. Adorno Prize in 1998.