

RECONSIDERING HOLOCAUST STUDY

INTRODUCTION

Why the Holocaust? Why Sociology? Why Now?

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Contemporary sociological research is marked by a profound silence in relation to the Holocaust (Bauman 1989; Kaufman 1996; Markle 1995).¹ The chasm is acute in the sociological literature written in English, the focus of our attention, though the lacuna is also evident in other fields such as anthropology and cultural studies. To rephrase Virginia Dominguez's (1993) critical scrutiny of anthropology, it appears as if sociology might also have a "Jewish problem" (621). Few sociologists, regardless of their religious or cultural identity, have focused their academic work on the Holocaust or post-Holocaust life. Those who have tend to be in Jewish studies programs, and thus their work is often regarded as marginal to most disciplines. But the question, of course, should not be limited to why more Jewish sociologists do not focus on the Holocaust or post-Holocaust life; rather, we should ask why not more sociologists in general are not taking up such research.

Comparable problems are apparent in the piecemeal study of immigration. Jews initially presented the ideal type for the concept of diaspora (Clifford 1994; Safran 1991), so much so that the term was initially more or less synonymous with the Jewish experience. Contemporary scholars have frequently lost sight of this earlier case and instead have explored the notion of diaspora among dispersed Third World peoples without appropriate reference to or comparison with the Jewish diaspora (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002; Gold 2002). Like previous scholars, we do not wish to suggest that a Jewish diaspora is or ought to be hegemonic. Yet there are dangers of "'transcend[ing]'; evading or erasing Jewishness in cultural studies of the new diasporas" (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002:13).

Omitting the case of a premodern Jewish diaspora permits erroneous assumptions, such as that diasporas are twentieth-century phenomena or that Jews are questionable multicultural subjects. A broadened, more inclusive notion of the concept of diaspora “offers rich material for a reinvigoration of Jewish thought. But the converse is also true: analyses of non-Jewish diasporas will be most fruitful when they engage in dialogue with the specific Jewish context in which the term originated” (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002:7).

Similarly, contemporary discussions of refugees are increasingly represented in the literature as “first and foremost a ‘Third World problem’” (Malkki 1995b: 503). In immigration studies, numerous authors (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Portes and Rumbaut 1996) have argued how post-1965 immigrants or refugees from the Third World differ from earlier European immigrants due to the postcolonial context, the global economy, and the racialized nature of U.S. society. Yet the proposition that the same analytic models do not pertain to pre-1965 immigrant groups precludes analyses of similarities and differences between Holocaust refugees and more recent migrants. Furthermore, though many assume that transnationalism is a contemporary postmodern phenomenon, Jewish experiences before and after World War II were and continue to be transnational, yet they have not been analyzed in such terms. Given the multiple diasporic migrations of pre- and post-Holocaust European Jews, comparative analyses with, for example, Indians in East Africa or the Chinese in Vietnam (Bhachu 1985; Espiritu this volume) could enable important new understandings of immigration processes and outcomes when there are multiple cycles of displacement and resettlement rather than a single occurrence.

In Holocaust studies, the concept of survivor has increasingly dominated research and public discourse, precluding appropriate comparisons with other stateless refugees. Today in the United States, moreover, the term *survivor* can pertain to almost anything—from someone who was a victim of incest to someone who remains employed after a corporate merger—whereas formerly it had the specific connotation of referring to Jews interned in concentration camps. In other words, the intellectual isolationism that pervades studies of the Holocaust and maintains its marginal status vis-à-vis sociology has made it more difficult to draw appropriate comparisons with relevant phenomena; it also inadvertently permits inappropriate assumptions and conclusions.

Moreover, there are constructs central to the sociological enterprise—including race, ethnicity, minority group, assimilation, and insider/outsider status—

that have shaped Holocaust scholarship (Biale, Galchinsky, and Heschel 1998; Boyarin and Boyarin 1997). While these works appropriately draw on rich intellectual traditions, there are few sociologists directly connected with these endeavors, and thus some of the most recent and best work on race and ethnicity, for instance, remains absent from these projects. That said, it continues to be both significant and necessary that Holocaust scholarship was originally devoted to documenting the past, to developing the historical record of what happened, where and when it happened, and if knowable, how it happened. Yet increasingly writers have come to recognize that the historicity of the Holocaust must be understood both in and of itself and as a reflection of how we interpret and represent our knowledge of the past.

Collective memory, according to the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992), refers to the ways in which the present molds how and what we recall of the past—a quintessentially sociological project. We remember and forget as members of particular groups in particular social locations, and through these processes, identities are formed and reformed. To a considerable extent, groups shape their own memories (Novick 1999), and thus how a group remembers its past reveals the group's sense of itself and its understanding of the past. Similarly, Hirsch and Smith (2002) elaborate this concept with their reference to “cultural memory,” which they understand to be “an act in the present by which individuals and groups constitute their identities by recalling a shared past on the basis of common, and therefore often contested norms, conventions, and practices” (2002:5). And yet curiously, though historians and others in the humanities have relied heavily on notions of collective and cultural memory to analyze the Holocaust, such endeavors have remained limited in sociology (see Bodemann 1996; Levy and Sznajder 2005; Olick 1999a; Olick and Levy 1997; and Olick and Robbins 1998 for notable exceptions).

The dynamic link between collective memory and collective identity constitutes an important focus of this book. It is generally accepted that the Shoah plays a crucial role in Jewish collective memory and, therefore, in the constitution of Jewish identity. Indeed, scholars note with concern the increasing prominence of the Shoah as the basis, and sometimes the sole basis, of contemporary Jewish identity (Goldberg 1995; Novick 1999). It is clear, however, that not every generation has the same memory of the Holocaust because of its respective historical positions and life experiences, and much of what we understand to be “the” memory of the Holocaust is actually *post-memory*: “Postmemory is distinguished

from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (Hirsch 1997:22). Thus the post-memory of the second or third generation differs considerably from the memory of Holocaust perpetrators or survivors because only survivors or perpetrators witnessed these events. For the rest of us, post-memory of the Holocaust is filtered through a variety of sources including records and documents, memoirs and narratives of the destruction written and compiled by survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders, and contemporary research, textual accounts, and artistic portrayals of the Holocaust.

Several of the authors in this volume rely on the framework of collective identity and memory to examine daily practices of identities. Similarly, other writers consider the differential relationships of survivors and the "1.5" and second generations to the diaspora, as well as to processes of collective displacement, resistance, and resettlement.² How do survivors of genocide experience their collective identities in the aftermath of trauma, and how does that vary among generations? Such questions intersect with several important themes in immigration, diaspora, transnational, and refugee studies.

Thus we recognize the need to expand intellectual exchange between researchers working on the Holocaust and post-Holocaust life with North American sociologists working in the fields of diasporic and transnational studies, immigration, and collective memory. We do not want to suggest that Jewish experiences are either unique or hegemonic, but instead seek to understand how our knowledge of immigration and transnationalism, for instance, would change if the case of a post-Holocaust diaspora were brought into that literature, and conversely, how that research tradition might complicate our thinking of post-Holocaust immigration. The current state of these intellectual separate spheres has helped maintain Holocaust studies as an area of inquiry onto itself, one located in an academic ghetto distant from sociological practices particularly in the United States and in Canada. Ultimately, this intellectual bifurcation impoverishes both Holocaust studies and sociology. Within Holocaust studies, this separatism has meant that research proceeds without comparative knowledge from sociological areas of study that might deepen our understanding of the precursors, dynamics, and consequences of the Holocaust, thereby buttressing the presumptive claim of the Holocaust's uniqueness without exploration.³ Conversely, the missing case of the Holocaust in North American sociology means that many theories and substantive generalizations have not been tested on what is arguably a defining moment of the twentieth century.

In addition to the issues emanating from the sharp divide between these areas

of inquiry, the virtual absence of a comparative study of the Holocaust introduces another set of problems for researchers.⁴ Arguments about the uniqueness and incommensurability of the Holocaust actually assume a series of implicit comparisons and judgments about whether those comparisons are justified. In other words, claims for the uniqueness of the Holocaust or any other phenomenon are premised on comparisons. For example, the idea that the Holocaust is genocide derives from the knowledge that the Holocaust shares several properties with other genocides. Comparisons enumerate both similarities and differences. The Holocaust is not identical to other genocides, but it is sufficiently similar to be categorized as genocide. In other words, assertions about the Holocaust's uniqueness depend on implicit comparisons, while at the same time precluding the possibility for subsequent explicit comparisons by insisting on the principle of the Holocaust's incommensurability.

And yet it is the responsibility of social science scholars to analyze as well as document, and making these implicit comparisons explicit remains a central goal of this volume. We believe that studies of comparison and generalization enable a more sophisticated understanding of the Holocaust. Appropriate comparative study of the Holocaust does not diminish its importance, but instead enables a more sophisticated and refined understanding. This approach points to an intellectual agenda that includes questions about which comparisons about the Holocaust are made, contested, and refused, by whom and under what conditions. We also ask what forms of comparison prevail in popular and scholarly discourses and how they influence each other. In ethnographic research, we want to know how people use comparison and generalization in their speech and silence about the Holocaust. And to our presumptive critics, we want to make clear that adopting this approach will not diminish or defame the Holocaust or its legacy. Rather, it promises to widen and deepen our understanding and produce more sophisticated knowledge.

The authors in this volume thus refuse the practice of separating sociological inquiry, on the one hand, from Holocaust studies, on the other, and instead seek to further the richness of scholarly interchange by bringing these literatures together into comparative conversations. As a collection, these articles provide innovative approaches to studying the Holocaust and post-Holocaust life using the concepts, theories, and methods available to us working predominantly in sociology and in closely related social science fields. Primarily, we rely on recent research on race and ethnicity, immigration and assimilation, identity, collective memory and transnationalism in our studies of the Holocaust and post-Holo-

caust Jewish life. We seek to understand how these approaches might expand and contribute to a more complex understanding of the Holocaust. At the same time, the chapters of the current volume help move research on the Holocaust and closely related research in Jewish studies out from the academic margins onto center stage, providing new perspectives that enable us to rethink how our sociological knowledge might be revised to incorporate the insights available from studies of the Holocaust and post-Holocaust life. Indeed, the organization of this volume reflects this dual emphasis with authors who interrogate the Holocaust and its aftermath using the analytic tools prominent in recent sociological scholarship and other commentators who speak to how these works might contribute to ongoing questions in their areas of specialization in sociology and related fields.

The initial motivations behind this volume and the October 2001 conference from which it stems are simple: as feminist sociologists well steeped in the field of the political economy of gender and labor, we understood from our earlier work the need to place disparate fields of inquiry into dialogue with each other and realized that this type of interchange can yield many important insights unattainable through a more singular, solitary focus. When we began our individual research projects on the Holocaust and post-Holocaust Jewish life, we found, and continue to find ourselves wandering in what seems like a sociological desert. As we write about the Holocaust, we continually search for links with sociological constructs central to our projects. Just as academics often create the courses they wish they had had as students, we endeavor to join these different fields as both a template and a catalyst for other scholars.

While we asked authors to consider the role that sociology could play in their research, we conversely asked commentators to consider how Holocaust research might inform, expand, or challenge ideas central to their areas of study if it were more central to those areas of inquiry. The scholars in this volume incorporate a broad range of sociological theories, methods, and substantive findings into studies of Holocaust and post-Holocaust Jewish experiences, focusing attention on topics that heretofore have received fleeting consideration because of other disciplinary emphases. For example, sociologists are accustomed to considering the interface of macro social structures and microlevel interactions and thus are well positioned to articulate how state policies regarding immigration shaped collective identities as refugees, immigrants, and survivors. The content of these essays and the format of our book can only invite comparative analyses, an endeavor long overdue in reference to Jewish experiences and the Holocaust. We

have much to gain from dismantling the barriers that have for too long contained the study of the Holocaust and Jewish life in their academic ghettos.

Thus the chapters in this volume center on the themes of memory, identity, and diaspora in the Holocaust and its aftermath, which both draw on and contribute to ongoing work in sociology in these areas as they intersect with studies of race and ethnicity, immigration, globalization, and social theory more generally. We have argued for the importance of intellectual cross-fertilization by integrating work on the Holocaust and post-Holocaust life into English-language sociology and using the analytic tools of sociology to further our understanding of the Shoah. Through the research in this volume, we have already seen the intellectual advantages of relying on a broadly defined sociological approach to interpret the empirical research presented here. It is our hope with the publication of this volume that its presence will initiate many more engagements with the intellectual endeavors that bring together what until now have been distant fields of knowledge.

Notes

1. We recognize the problems of language inherent in using the phrase *the Holocaust*, setting it up as the sole, most important holocaust and the standard for other holocausts. The term *holocaust* itself is a Greek word referring to a burnt sacrifice. Hebrew and Yiddish referents represent its location within Jewish life rather than in a world event (Young 1988). The Hebrew word *Sho'ah* means “disaster” or “catastrophe,” as do the less commonly used terms *hurban* in Hebrew and its Yiddish analogue *hurbn*. Yet both these terms do not directly name the Nazi genocide. Without an alternative available, we reluctantly reproduce the problem here. We use the terms *the Holocaust* and *Shoah* interchangeably.
2. While there is widespread recognition of the importance of generations to the study of immigration (Rumbaut [1976] 2004a, 2004b; Zhou 1997) and the significance of generations to collective memory of the Holocaust (Aviv and Shneer this volume; Hirsch 1997; Kaufman this volume; Suleiman 2002), there is no consensus on how best to define and measure the concept. The term *1.5 generation* was originally developed by Rumbaut ([1976] 2004a) to elucidate the differences between immigrant youth and their first-generation foreign-born immigrant elders, on the one hand, and their second-generation, native-born kin and friends, on the other. Rumbaut (2004b) operationalizes the *1.5 generation* to include those who were preadolescent children of primary school age upon immigration, thus distinguishing them from ideal typical first- and second-generation immigrants. Other scholars have either failed to recognize the *1.5 generation* or resorted to fuzzier age-based definitions.

3. A dearth of formal comparative research and extensive links among the Holocaust and relevant social science literatures helps secure the vexed and highly contested idea that the Holocaust was unique. Though it is not the major focus of our work here, we, like Bauer (2001), argue that the Holocaust was unprecedented yet not unique.
4. Fein's (1993) work on comparative genocide remains an important exception.