

YOU WILL HAVE TO READ THE FOLLOWING ESSAY VERY CAREFULLY. I HAVE UNDERLINED SOME OF THE MAJOR POINTS. WHEN YOU FINISH THE ESSAY, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE, IN YOUR OWN WORDS, TO EXPLAIN, DEFINE AND/OR GIVE EXAMPLES FROM YOUR STUDY OF THE HOLOCAUST WHAT IS MEANT BY:

- **BEAURACRATIC EFFICIENCY**
- **SCIENCE SUPPORTED THE IDEOLOGY OF RACISM AND THE FINAL SOLUTION**
- **FUNCTIONAL RATIONALITY OR FUNCTIONAL REASON**
- **WHEN A PROBLEM ARISES WHICH HINDERS ONE'S GOAL, SIMPLY SET UP A NEW BUREAU TO HANDLE IT.**
- **THE DESK KILLERS**
- **ORDINARY PEOPLE, NOT JUST FANATICS WERE INVOLVED IN NAZI GENOCIDE**
- **ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS WERE MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE WEAPONS USED IN GENOCIDE.**
- **PERFORMING EVIL ACTS WAS PART OF ONE'S JOB DESCRIPTION**
- **LOSS OF TRADITIONAL MORALITY WAS A PREREQUISITE, IF BEAURACRACY AND TECHNOLOGY WERE TO DOMINATE**

FUNCTIONAL RATIONALITY

Why is it that the Holocaust has made so little difference? Why is it that Elie Wiesel can still say that “nothing has been learned”? Is it that our preoccupation with nightmarish details prevents us from confronting the impact of the Holocaust upon our Western values?

The Holocaust is an event of such magnitude and importance that it calls into question the most fundamental assumptions and values of our culture.

It is the Holocaust that assaults the very idea of progress as panacea, and shocks us into the awareness that our long-cherished belief in progress is problematic. It is not just one problem among many, but the problem upon which our hope for the future of mankind depends.

Despite our knowledge of the death camps and factory-like crematoria, we cling to the belief that somehow all this destruction of humanity was just a gruesome mistake, a brief hiatus in the march of progress through the beneficence of “enlightened” reason and technical development. We resist the insights of those who see the factory chimneys of Auschwitz as symbolic of the hegemony of technique over humanity. We are deaf to the plea of those who, like George Iggers, are asking us to grasp the implications of the Holocaust as a triumph of technology. We are immune to his flat statement that:

The Final Solution, which in a sense symbolized the high point of the application of modern science and technology in the service of inhumanity, appears to spell the total absurdity of progress.¹

We dismiss such statements as over-dramatizing the overt similarities of the industrialized economic system and the economics of mass murder. And yet, as Irving Greenberg notes:

¹George Iggers, “The Idea of Progress: A Critical Reassessment,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. LXXI, no. 1 (October 1965), 15.

... It is plain that it is the bureaucratic training of the system that provides the administrative talent needed for the death camps and their deadly efficiency. It is this bureaucratic training that enables the executives to assume so effectively the role of mass human executioners. The intrinsic efficiency of the detached and objective mentality of the corporate directorate, the dispassionate attention to detail of the production managers, the stern effectiveness of the factory foremen combined to transform the task of mass murder into an orderly and routine process. The mentality of mass production transformed the art of murder into a science; the bureaucrats reigned triumphant in destruction, measuring success in statistics. As Richard Rubenstein remarks in the *Cunning of History*:

Bureaucratic mass murder reached its fullest development when gas chambers with the capacity for killing two thousand people at a time were installed at Auschwitz.²

Beyond providing the technical means, the scientific establishment also lent legitimacy to the whole project. Respectable figures either decreed that Jews, together with Gypsies, Slavs, and millions of others, were inferior races, or designated them as subhuman. These were not the dictates of a pseudo-science, but the considered judgments of established scientists who were members of faculties of reputable universities and research institutes.

In such circumstances, murder becomes no longer murder, but a justified measure in the higher interests of the people. It becomes a deliberate scientific undertaking, project for remedying the errors of the past by removing the causes of these errors, aimed at improving the nation's racial stock and bringing about a better and more secure future for all.

In this light, we see the relationship between science technology, and the Holocaust. The whole project took on the full authority and legitimacy as an effort to attain that most sacred of the Enlightenment ideals—the goal of perfection itself. It is in recognition of this fact that Hannah Arendt writes:

² Richard Rubenstein, *Cunning of History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 25.

There is a very little doubt that the perpetrators (of the Holocaust) committed (these crimes) for the sake of their ideology which they believed to be proven by science, experience and the laws of life.”³

As Lionel Rubinoff has pointed out, the great sociologists Max Weber and Karl Manneheim long ago identified this amoral behavior, and the way of thinking that sponsors it, as a form of rationality clearly associated with the triumph of technology and the advent of bureaucratic efficiency. They called it “functional rationality.” And they described it in much the same way as we have spoken of technical reason.⁴ Moreover, they laid out its distinguishing features: It is task-oriented, concerned simply with getting the job done and not with the substantive matter of what the job is, or where it fits in the pattern of culture. Functional rationality is not concerned with long-range results, but with cost-effectiveness. It is preoccupied with projecting an image of efficiency; it deals with units of labor rather than with human things. It is entirely capable of creating persons as mere objects, as the impersonal albeit necessary elements in the controlling machinery of production. It is, indeed, necessary for the purposes of functional rationality to accomplish the reduction of human beings to the status of things, in order that the efficiency of the whole process not be impaired by the irrelevancies of humane consideration. Nothing must interfere with the neat surgical precision of the process of completing the assigned task.

Strictly speaking, functional reason does not merely sanction the impersonal and detailed manipulation of one’s fellow human beings; it positively requires it. The task at hand, the duty to be performed, becomes the sole categories for winning approval and merit. The inevitable bureaucratization of all social problems follows. Wherever a problem crops up that stands in the way of the controlling program, a bureau is set up to take care of it. No problem is too great for a solution by means of functional reason. What needs to be done is simply pegged into the appropriate bureaucratic order and the technical mechanisms of the structure will take care of the rest.

Rubinoff⁵ has shown how the model of functional rationality helps to explicate the astounding technical efficiency it used to solve to the Jewish “problem.” It made the

³ Hannah Arendt, “Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps,” *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (1950), 62.

⁴ Lionel Rubinoff, “Auschwitz and the Pathology of Jew-Hatred”

⁵ Ibid.

carrying out of the Holocaust appear to its architects as a functionally rational solution to a practical problem that cropped up in the course of implementing their overall project. The mentality that extolled functional reason, and that ultimately reduced science and technology to mere ideological servitude, produces the novel phenomenon of the “desk-killer” that was an integral component of the whole process. Those responsible for murder never even came in contact with their victims, never came close to getting their hands bloodied with the consequences of their deeds. Far removed from the scenes of execution, these killers worked simply with pieces of paper. They came no closer to the lethal weapons of death than the typewriter and the pen with which the orders that willed murder were signed. As Rubinoff pointed out:

The Final Solution was a carefully planned, bureaucratically organized application of means to ends.⁶

This mentality, pervading the culture in which the desk-killer operates, enables him to retain his role as a normal member of his society. He is simply another functionary, carrying out his assigned task. Aside from that role, he is just another ordinary citizen, indistinguishable from his neighbors.

The pattern of functional reason has profound implications for our culture. We recognize it in Eichmann, who becomes for us the archetypical representative of all desk-killers; or in Himmler. But the point is that it is not a characteristic that is narrowly restricted to the members of an inner-circle of the Nazi hierarchy. These characteristics are widely distributed and diffused in the society at large. Ordinary people, those whom we would not be inclined to regard as ideologues or fanatics at all, become caught up in the process. They are as much the products of the mentality sponsored by functional reason as the authorities themselves. Indeed, their involvement becomes necessary for the fulfillment of the “Final Solution” envisaged by their leaders. Without them the “Final Solution” could never have been transposed from mere theory into gruesome practice.

Ordinary men and women have always had at their disposal the instruments of death. But what distinguishes these modern desk-killers is the *degree* of efficiency achieved through the refinements of bureaucratic organization and technical mastery. It is this mastery, and not just the presence of modern instruments of death, that Rubenstein emphasizes when he writes:

⁶ Ibid.

As we know, the twentieth century has witnessed extraordinary “progress” in the unlimited intensification of human destructiveness and the radicalization of the forms of human domination. Nevertheless, it was the organization skills of the Nazis rather than their weapons that made the society of total domination a reality.⁷

He sees that the society of total domination, made possible by recourse to functional reason in the service of ideology, is the necessary prerequisite for a society that could sponsor the “total death” of Auschwitz. Should the desk-killer have chanced to think of the consequences of his activities, he could always place a convenient distance between himself and the results by reference to the controlling social ideology.

In such a society, as Rubinoff has shown:

Men acquired the capacity for engaging in evil without experiencing it as such. They learned how to perform evil acts as part of their job description.⁸

It [the Holocaust] is an evil which is unprecedented precisely because we lack the categories to explain it. The usual explanations all fall far short, for what we encounter in the evil of the Holocaust far exceeds all of the customary motives. It is an evil so radical that it cannot be merely the result of moral degeneracy or apathy, or so great that it cannot be due to ignorance, hatred, envy, or greed. No conventional form of malice can account for the degree or scope of the evil visited upon our world by the Holocaust.

Who wants to heed the warning that it is *our own* culture that may destroy us through our own “idealization of science and technology,” and the use of a functional reason which we take for granted?

We have difficulty in coming to grips with this threat to our habitual confidence in progress and the technological solution. What has always seemed

⁷ Rubinstein, 79.

⁸ Rubinoff, 361.

to us a means of advancement in culture has now become a threat to that advance. Progress through science and technology has become our secular ideology, the major motivating force of Western industrial development and territorial expansion. No wonder, then, that we try to brush aside the more profound implications of the Holocaust; that we try to ignore this greatest of all assaults on the integrity of our secular faith. And yet, as Ernest Becker remarks, “Today, who can fail to see that the moral promise of commercial-industrial society has literally become ashes—and in our time, in Buchenwald and in Hiroshima.”⁹

With the Polish scholar, John T. Palikowski, we can see that “The Holocaust was not an isolated example of insane human brutality. Rather it marked the coming together of many of the major forces shaping contemporary Western society: bureaucracy, technology, and the loss of a transcendent morality.”¹⁰ We must also see that it is not merely the loss of a transcendent morality that is at issue, but that such a loss is insensibly replaced by a *new transcendence*—the transcendence of a secular ideology capable of subordinating even the age-old institutions of the religious culture to its dominance, of subverting traditional values to its monstrous aims and ends. With Lucy Dawidowicz we can see that this is what accounts for the fact that:

never before had mass murder been so regulated and regularized, organized on scientific principles of industrial management, its standardized procedures for killing developed by a system of empirical testing and designed to achieve a maximum efficiency of operation.¹¹

We can, therefore, agree with Norman Lamm that the Holocaust is an assault upon this “innocent” faith and hope, and conclude, as he does, that the Holocaust was the end of innocence in a century which began with the naïve belief in progress and human perfectability.¹²

⁹ Ernest Becker, *The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 62.

¹⁰ John T. Pawlikowski, “Christian Perspective and Moral Implications,” in *The Holocaust: Ideology, Bureaucracy and Genocide*, ed. Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton (New York: Krauss International Publications, 1980), 295.

¹¹ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The Holocaust and the Historian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 20.

¹² Norman Lamm, “Teaching the Holocaust,” *Forum* Vol. 1, no. 24 (1976), 57.