

# Modernity and the holocaust sociology essay



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The Enlightenment was an intellectual and cultural movement of the 18th century which desired to replace the obsolete, irrational ways of thinking by the rational, the sensible and the progressive. The immediate stimulus of the enlightenment movement was arguably the scientific revolution of the 16th and 19th century. Through the application of science and reason to the study of the natural world, men like Galileo and Isaac Newton made leaping advances and discoveries which exposed many scientific truths. These new found ' truths' usually contradicted the conventional, religious beliefs and explanations for the natural world, held and propagated by the church. It was thus a tremendously exciting and controversial time. A time, where the ' truth' about the world and the heavens could be discovered by the application of reason based on study.

The modern thinker of the 18th century Europe thus believed that anything and everything could be subjected to the study of reason. Art, customs, morals, traditions etc. hence could all be submitted to the study and rational understanding. It was felt that the ' truth' of these revealed discoveries could be applied in political and social spheres to ' fix' the problems of society and improve upon the general conditions of mankind. However the era of Enlightenment and its resulting outcomes did hold an arguably central failure. The Enlightenment in great part, failed to hold the capacity to deal with general human differences and diversity in terms of culture, tradition and ethnicities. The grave consequence of this failure can clearly be seen in Europe's relationship with non-European peoples and cultures in the period that came during and after the Enlightenment era. This period was the epoch of cultural in-sensitivity, colonization and racism etc. And these can

attributed in great part, to the universalist frameworks of inquiry of that time. The intellectual thought of 18th century Europe was arguably steeped in abstract conceptions of a standardized and inflexible human nature and majestic narratives of a progressive history of human civilization. The legacy of Enlightenment thus is plagued by an epistemological inadequacy of presumptions which fostered a manner of thinking that would for two centuries, serve to legitimize European global domination, racism and destruction.

## **Modernity**

The birth of modernity, took place in roughly the same time frame of that of the Enlightenment movement. In general terms, modernity refers to an historical era which is characterized by a move from feudalism towards modern day capitalism, secularization, rationalization and industrialization. Modernity means the cultural schemata and mechanisms of social action stemming from the Enlightenment and the modernization process. It is a set of new and “ man-made” rationalized mechanisms and rules for human societies. The interrelated dimensions of modernity may be roughly grouped into “ intellectual” and “ institutional” categories including subjectivity and individual self-consciousness, a spirit of rationalized public culture, rationalization of economic operations, bureaucracy in administrative management, self-discipline of public sphere and democratization etc. Modernity remains the major support and dynamic in keeping human society running today. Characteristics of modernity are based on highly industrialized societies, which have regular patterns of everyday life. Some

of the main characteristics of these modern societies include have already been mentioned; however are some central ones, described in more detail:

**Bureaucracy:** Impersonal, social hierarchies that are based on the general division of labor coupled with regularity of systems, methods and procedures.

**Rationalization:** A way of looking at the world and managing it through the use of logic, objectivity and impartial theories and data.

**Disenchantment:** A move away from understanding the natural world, the heavens and general life through metaphysical ideas.

**Secularization:** A move away from religious influence at a societal level

**Commodification:** The decline of all facets and aspects of life to the items of monetary exchange, utilization and consumption.

**Alienation:** Isolation of individuals from institutions of meaning and emotions i. e. religion, family, tradition, meaningful work etc.

## **Modernity and the Holocaust**

A number of postmodern theorists have attacked modernity for causing racism. Far from seeing the Enlightenment belief in rationality as likely to undermine racist beliefs, they have argued that modernity has actually encouraged racism. Postmodern theorists have also argued that racism arises out of a modern tendency to see the world in terms of binary oppositions, or pair of opposites. Western modernity has contrasted itself

with 'others' who are taken to be very different. Out of this process racism develops.

In *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) 'Zygmunt Bauman' argues that the Holocaust was a product of modernity. The mass extermination of Jews (and others in Nazi Germany) was not simply a result of anti-Semitism, an illogical racism directed against Jews. Rather, the Holocaust was a product of the central features of modernity. Bauman says:

The truth is that every 'ingredient' of the Holocaust—all those many things that rendered it possible—was normal...in the sense of being fully in keeping with everything we know about our civilizations, its guiding spirit, its priorities...of the proper ways to pursue human happiness together with a perfect society. (Bauman 1989)

The links between the Holocaust and modernity take a number of forms:

The Holocaust was a product of modern, bureaucratic rationality. The German bureaucracy (particularly the notorious SS) were charged with the task of removing Jews from Germany. In keeping with the principles of modern bureaucracy, the people involved did not question the aims given to them by their political masters. They simply sought the technically efficient means to achieve the objective. Moving the Jews to Poland caused administrative problems for those Germans who had to govern the annexed territories. Another proposal at that time was to send the Jews to Madagascar, a colony of defeated France. However this proved impractical as well. The distances involved and the British naval capabilities meant that millions of Jews could not be sent there. Mass extermination was chosen

because it was simply the most technically efficient means with which to rid Germany of Jewish presence. The 'Final Solution' did not clash at any stage with the rational pursuits of efficient, optimal goal implementation. On the contrary it arose out of a genuinely rational concern, and it was generated by bureaucracy true to its form and purpose. Thus bureaucratic organization can be used to serve any end, and the modern ethos that bureaucrats should not question the purpose of their organization, precludes them from taking steps to prevent events such as those of the Holocaust.

Evidence from the Holocaust survivors suggests that most of the members of the SS responsible for carrying out the Holocaust did not appear to be psychologically disturbed sadists. They in fact, appeared to be relatively normal individuals. However, they were able to participate in such inhuman acts because they were authorized to do so by their superiors and because the killing was routinized. They subjected themselves to the discipline of the organization to which they belonged. Accepting organizational discipline is another feature of rational organization in modernity. The honor of civil servants depends upon their ability to follow the orders of their political masters, even if they personally disagree with those orders. Furthermore, modern, rational organization tends to make the consequence of individual actions less obvious. The part played by each member of a bureaucratic system may seem distant from the final consequence. Thus an official who designated people as 'non-Aryan' in Nazi Germany would be unlikely to think of himself or herself as being responsible for mass murder. Even the actual killing in the Holocaust was sanitized by the use of gas chambers. Earlier methods had included machine gunning victims. However, this was

both inefficient and made the inhumanity of what was going on, markedly more obvious. Gas chambers minimized such difficulties.

Modernity is based upon the existence of nation-states with clear cut boundaries. Jews were regarded as 'foreigners within' in European states. According to Bauman, in pre-modern Europe the presence of Jewish 'otherness' did not on the whole prevent their accommodation into the general social order. Pre-modern societies were divided by castes and Jews were a different group. Modern nation states emphasize the homogeneity of a nation in order to foster nationalist sentiment. Their desire to maintain boundaries involves excluding the alien 'other'. This produces a condition within which racism can thrive.

From the Enlightenment onwards, modern thinking has maintained that human societies can progress through the application of rational, scientific knowledge in planning society. The anti-Semitism that was expressed in extreme form in the Holocaust was backed by German scientists who could supposedly prove the inferiority of the Jewish race. The mass extermination of the Jewish population was based on the grounds that doing so, would improve the fabric of German society as a whole. Such projects to transform society are typically modern and would not be considered in pre-modern societies, which lacked such a sense of progress.

The claims made by Bauman, are controversial to the say the least and thus have been met with much criticism. Critics like sociologist, 'Karen Malik' denies that modernity can be seen as responsible for racism and is highly critical of the postmodern approach to 'race'. He does not deny that racism

has been a powerful and corrosive force in modern societies but he does not view racism as a product of modernity itself. He does not believe that the celebration of difference, which he sees as a key feature of postmodern thinking, is the way to undermine racism. Instead, he argues that racism can best be tackled by reviving some of the principles upon which modernity is based. In particular he believes that the application of universal principles is preferable to acknowledging and celebrating variety in human groups.

Karen Malik is also critical of the claim that the Holocaust can be blamed on modernity simply because modernity provides the technological means to accomplish mass extermination. Modern technology has also been used to alleviate problems such as famine and material poverty. The existence of advanced technology in itself cannot be held responsible for the political decision to use technology to exterminate people by gassing.

' I find it odious that scholars can in all seriousness equate mass extermination with the production of McDonald's hamburgers...or make a comparison between technology aimed at improving the material abundance of society and political decisions which annihilate whole peoples and destroy entire societies.' (Malik 1996)

Other criticisms have attacked Bauman's claim that the Holocaust was a product of modernity. They argue instead, that the Holocaust arose in specific historical circumstances rather than being a product of modernity in general. If blame for the holocaust can be attributed to anything, it should be to capitalism rather than reason. Modernity involves a belief in reason and the application of science, while capitalism involves economic relationships



based on the pursuit of profit. The two are not the same, indeed capitalism may make it difficult to achieve the equality that was the objective of many modern thinkers. The inequalities produced by capitalism may encourage people to think of other 'races' as inferior, but this is not the same as saying that racism is produced by science and reason.

Michael Hviid Jacobsen is another critic, who criticizes the claim that racism can be understood in terms of the concept of the 'other'. He does not believe that modernity causes people to automatically compare themselves to other people, and that as a result racism develops. He suggests that such claims are so sweeping as to be seriously misleading. In his view, it cannot be assumed that, over many centuries Westerners have seen all non-Westerners as the 'Other' in the same way. Western views of other people have been related to specific contexts and circumstances. For example, different meanings have been given to the possession of black skin at different times and at different places in modern history. At one time, most westerners thought it was acceptable to enslave people with black skins however; this is no longer the case. The meaning of 'otherness' is often disputed and contentious, and not all modern, post-Enlightenment thinkers have been persuaded of the truth of racist beliefs.

## **Conclusion**

Bauman claims that the possibility of the Holocaust was created by modernity. He does not deny that modernity has had its benefits, but he does believe that it created the conditions in which racism can thrive. This is particularly because modernity detaches morality from rationality and technical efficiency. In later works, Bauman goes onto discuss post-

modernity and argues, that in post-modernity authority becomes dispersed amongst different groups of experts and is not centralized in the hands of the state. This returns more moral responsibility to the hands of the individual, who can now choose at least which authority to take notice of. Bauman therefore believes that post-modernity reduces the chances of events such as those of the Holocaust occurring. It opens up more opportunity for challenges to racism and more likelihood of the tolerance of diversity. Bauman associates post-modernism with the acceptance of pluralism and the rejection of harmful attempts to direct the development of society.