Ethnocentrism and Cultural Dissonance Among Perpetrators of the Holocaust: A Sociological Contribution to the Goldhagen Debate

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On July 13, 1942, the men of Reserve Police Battalion (ORPO) 101 arrived in Jozefow, Poland where their commander, Major Wilhelm Trapp, informed the men that they have been ordered to round up the Jews of the village and to shoot all but the working aged, able bodied men, who would be transported to a work camp, (Browning 1992:xv). Major Trapp, with tears in his eyes, went on to offer his men the opportunity to decline the assignment should they feel unable to partake. Only twelve of the 500 men accepted Major Trapp's offer, (Browning 1992:159, Goldhagen 1996:213). As the Final Solution to the Jewish question raged across German occupied territory, ordinary men like those who made up Reserve Police Battalion 101 became willing participants of genocide. Such a reality begs the question: what circumstances compel an ordinary person to commit extraordinary acts of violence? Scholars across various disciplines have analyzed the Holocaust in Eastern Europe to explore this question. Though few works have caused such heated debate as that of Daniel Johan Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust.*

The Goldhagen Debate

Hitler's Willing Executioners was an expansive work derived from Goldhagen's reward winning 1994 doctoral dissertation *The Nazi Executioners: A Study of Their Behavior and the Causation of Genocide*, (APSA 2018). Following the book's initial 1996 release was a flurry of mixed media reception across the United States and Germany, (Bellafante et al. 2021, National Book Critics Circle 1996). Goldhagen participated in a number of speaking events including a symposium held at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, (Goldhagen et al. 1996), and

was rewarded the prestigious Triennial Democracy Prize from Germany's largest political periodical, Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik's, (Hay 2000). While widely popular among non-academic and German youth, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* sparked a heated debate throughout academic circles in what is now referred to as "The Goldhagen Debate." The controversy over Goldhagen's work largely concerns the book's questionable methodology and its simplistic conclusion that antisemitism alone could explain how ordinary persons became willing participants in genocide.

Few scholars of genocide would diminish the role antisemitism played in the Holocaust. Thereby, the controversy surrounding Goldhagen's work is not in his analysis of antisemitism, but in his monocausal conclusion that antisemitism was the only contributing factor. Current works involved in the Goldhagen debate largely come from the fields of history, journalism, political science, and social psychology. While sociological themes of ethnocentrism and cultural dissonance are touched on in various works within the Goldhagen Debate, no contribution as of yet has explored these concepts as a major theme. This work has been created to bridge that gap.

To ensure readability and coherence, the body of this work has been separated into three sections. The first section offers a synapse of Goldhagen's account of premodern European antisemitism and its causal effect on Holocaust perpetrator behaviors. This synapse is supplemented with other works where appropriate to enhance contextual clarity. The second section examines recurring qualms of Goldhagen's work as expressed by his critics. It is in the third section where this author examines arguments of perpetrator behavior and enhances these positions by introducing themes of ethnocentrism and cultural dissonance.

A Note on Perpetrator Accountability

Before delving too far into this work, a note on perpetrator accountability must be addressed. Academics and non-academics alike have discussed their discomfort in humanizing perpetrators of genocide. This discomfort is largely due to a false parallel between understanding and justification, and the belief that to offer an explanation is to remove accountability. I disagree with this sentiment. I share in historian Christopher Browning's outlook that, "Explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving," (1992: 9-22). With this outlook in mind, I contend that the seemingly indecipherable phenomena surrounding human made atrocities, such as mass killings and genocide, are indeed decipherable precisely because they are human. No amount of potential discomfort in the rationalizing of human atrocity outweighs the benefit of understanding human behavior-For it is through understanding that sustainable preventions may be implemented.

Hitler's Willing Executioners: Antisemitism in Premodern Europe

In his work, *Hitler's Willing Executioners,* Daniel Johan Goldhagen set out to create what he refers to as a "micro-physic of the Holocaust's perpetration," a process which analyzes German specific sociocultural elements that promoted individual's commitment to genocide, (Goldhagen 1996:24). Goldhagen's thesis revolves around the assertion that lifelong exposure to large spread German antisemitism was influential enough in and of itself for individual actors to exert violence against the Jewish population.

In his analysis, Goldhagen traced the roots of European antisemitism to early European Christian writers such as John Chrysostom, Peter the Venerable of Cluny, and Martin Luther. A reoccurring theme in the works of these early Christian authors was that Christianity created the most perfect union between God and humanity. As such, Judaism's rejection of Jesus as messiah

was not simply a matter of differing religious beliefs, but an open act of aggression against Christians and God himself, (Goldhagen 1996:33-34).

For Goldhagen, the most damaging proclamation that these persuasive Christian leaders argued was that all Jews, past and present, are personally responsible for the death of Jesus. Such logic proclaimed that all Jews were "Christ killers," servants of evil entities, and were personally responsible for all the ills, hardships, and natural disasters wrought upon earth and its people. As such, Jews had been marked as the most dangerous and powerful of all evils in the eyes of premodern Christian anti-Semites, (Goldhagen 1996:49-54). To explain how premodern Christian antisemitism continued to affect the worldview of nineteenth-century Germans, Goldhagen turns to cultural model theory[1].

Cultural model theory can be understood as the way in which an individual's worldview is shaped by their social interactions with others. As social psychologist James Waller explains, "culture-specific thoughts, norms, values, codes, and principles become part of an individual's perceptual frame, (Waller 2002:172). Goldhagen uses a similar description of social influence to explain how the large spread antisemitic beliefs of premodern European Christians influenced German citizens to unequivocally accept the Jewish population as subhuman and malicious.

When the eighteenth-century political writer Wilhelm Von Dohm wrote of Jewish populations throughout Germany, he proclaimed, "The Jew is more a man [human] than Jew," an insinuation that the Jewish population could be redeemed if they were to renounce their "Jewishness," (Goldhagen 1996:57). While Von Dohm may have considered himself to be a "friend of the Jews," his attitude was merely one more way in which antisemitism was displayed.

[1] Goldhagen uses "cultural cognitive model," "cognitive model," and "cultural model" interchangeably throughout his work. I discuss the limitations of using the terms synonymously in a later portion of this work.

Ergo, when the Jewish population largely dismissed this so-called opportunity for redemption through conversion, bewildered liberals resolved that there must be an innate biological inferiority that prevented the Jewish population from assimilating fully into German society. In consequence, racially based antisemitism largely replaced religious based antisemitism throughout Germany, (Goldhagen 1996: 53-61). While religious inferiority could be corrected through conversion, racial inferiority could never be redeemed. Thereby, the Jewish population was sentenced to "an eternal thoroughbred of foreignness," (Goldhagen 1996:66), thus indefinitely marking them as separate from the rest of German society.

Perpetrator Behaviors

Goldhagen asserts that antisemitic separatism ran so deeply throughout German citizen's psyche that it manifested as uniquely barbaric practices among German guards and police units that was seldom utilized against non-Jewish prisoners (Goldhagen 1996:181-376). According to Goldhagen, because the vast majority of Germans shared in Hitler's eliminationist antisemitism, and because the perpetrators were themselves representative of German society, it can be concluded that the vast majority of ordinary Germans would have participated in the killings had they had the opportunity, (Goldhagen et al. 1996). Those who did have the opportunity were committed to make the most of it.

Assigning arbitrarily exhausting and demoralizing work appeared to be a favorite pastime for many German guards in the camps. "German masters resorted to forcing the Jews to labor in a manner intended to generate mainly suffering and death. Many former prisoners comment on their purposeless toil," (Goldhagen 1996:294). In conjunction with their purposeless toils, Jewish prisoners were subject to brutal beatings with whips, sometimes on a specialized whipping table,

electrical shocks, hours long roll calls, and public hangings in which to terrorize Jewish prisoners and amuse their tormentors, (Goldhagen 1996:293-316).

Proximity to the victims did not appear to be either a contributing or diminishing factor in German enthusiasm to partake in violence, for Goldhagen's descriptions of brutality among the mobile killing units parallels the brutalities described in the camps. One difference between these two killing operations that Goldhagen does touch base on is that of unit comradery. To establish that the members of the police battalions were not mere "robotic killing machines," Goldhagen provides various examples of leisure activities in which most unit members would regularly participate. Such as going to church, watching movies, drinking, singing, and competitive sports, (Goldhagen 1996:186-187). Even subordinate-superior relationships appeared to have a familial tone, (Goldhagen 1996:220-221, 266).

Goldhagen's Critics

A number of critic's question Goldhagen's assertion that German antisemitism was uniquely eliminationist and widespread. In attempting to empirically gauge the nature of antisemitism among elite political and cultural circles, Goldhagen contends that it cannot be done for the proper data does not exist. He continues to say that even a "run-of-the-mill" public opinion poll would be "eliminating," (Goldhagen 1996:47). Fortunately for Goldhagen, such data does exist. Erich Fromm's (1980) Weimar Germany 1929-1930 political opinion and personality survey, which happened to measured levels of antisemitism, was publicly released in 1980. A careful analysis of Fromm's findings from Robert B. Smith (1998) directly contradicts Goldhagen's claims of widespread German antisemitism. Smith (1998) resolves that economic uncertainty, Nazi coercion, and personal interests, not antisemitism, offer a more sensible explanation regarding increasing German support for the Nazi party. Smith's claims are not

unique and have been supported by a number of other sources (Brustein 1997:216-221, Anheier 1997, Gamson 1997, Turner 1996, Duverger 1963, Mason 1993, Hilberg 1997).

German antisemitism also fails to satisfactorily explain perpetrator behavior for most critics. Raul Hilberg (1997) criticizes Goldhagen's failure to acknowledge non-German participants, non-Jewish victims, and antisemitism in other parts of the world. Christopher Browning, whose 1992 work, *Ordinary Men,* had been rather clumsily criticized by Goldhagen, agreed with Goldhagen's claims that numerous ordinary Germans had voluntarily participated in the mass murder of Jewish persons. However, Browning is quick to condemn Goldhagen's methodology. "Daniel Goldhagen calls for a study of the 'combination of cognitive and situational factors' that brought such perpetrators to contribute to the Holocaust. This is a suggestion I would support. But Goldhagen does not employ such a combined approach for studying German perpetrators of the Holocaust," said Browning during a 1996 symposium at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, (Goldhagen et al. 1996). Several other critics have also condemned Goldhagen's questionable methodology (Goldhagen et al. 1996, Lerner et al. 1997, Port 2017, Roth 2004, Smith 1998) and I offer my own criticisms in the following section.

Race, Ethnocentrism, and Antisemitism

The central claim in Goldhagen's book is that the cultural cognitive model, which he uses interchangeably with cognitive model, and cultural model, provides an all-encompassing explanation for German eliminationist antisemitism. However, Goldhagen never actually defines his operational usages for these terms. While the terms are conceptually similar, they are not synonymous. Goldhagen's ambiguous usage leads to unnecessarily incoherent statements that could have easily been prevented, and perhaps even enhanced, had he used-and defined his operational usage of-these terms, nuances of the cultural model could have been explored and

likely would have aided Goldhagen's understanding of German society's ever evolving perceptions of race.

Social perceptions of race are in a perpetual motion of change. While the majority of persons raised in western society have been taught to understand race as a solely biological concept, this perspective has been largely contested in recent years. Particularly so among scholars and human rights activists, who promote a more thorough understanding of race as a sociopolitical construct (Sanders 1969, Marks 1995, Haney Lopez 1996, Jacobson 1998, Mills 1997, Stratton 1999, Morning 2014, Omi and Winant 2015). It should be noted here that race as a sociopolitical construct does not deny that certain biological variants exist throughout and within racial/ethnic groups. Rather, the sociopolitical construct of race argues that our perceptions of race come from a sociopolitical basis that subjectively measures biological differences in a way that favors some races/ethnicities over others. Furthermore, these racial/ethnic classifications are subject to change alongside shifting sociopolitical climates.

When Goldhagen speaks of a shift between religious and racial antisemitism, which he traces to the eighteenth-century, he describes race as, "the way to explain the source of the Jews' unchanging foreignness and of their enormously dangerous character," (Goldhagen et al. 1996). What he fails to acknowledge is that all of western civilization was undergoing a similar secular and racial reckoning during this time (Curtin 1971, van den Berghe 1978). As historian Francis Jennings states, "in the gradual transition from religious conceptions to racial conceptions, the gulf between persons calling themselves Christian and the other persons, whom they called heathen, translated smoothly into a chasm between whites and coloreds [nonwhites]," (1975). As such, religious to racial othering was not unique to the Jewish experience. I turn to the concept of ethnocentrism for further analysis.

Ethnocentrism refers to the human tendency to evaluate and judge other cultures using the standards and norms of one's own culture (Sumner 1906). When persons use their own culture as reference to the values and behaviors they expect of all populations, there is a tendency to develop an exaggerated vanity for the self and for those with whom they share commonalities, as well as an exaggerated disdain for outsiders and deviators, thus promoting stereotypes, prejudice, racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and scapegoating (Sumner 1906, Ozcelik and Ogretir Ozcelik 2008). Scapegoating, which results from displaced frustrations onto a powerless member of an out-group in the form of prejudice or aggression, is more likely to occur during times of prolonged or sudden strain, (Stroebe and Insko 1989, Seeman 1959, Durkheim 1997), such as the sociopolitical and economic climate throughout Germany in the years leading up to and during Hitler's leadership. Scapegoating may also be seen as one of the many potential results occurring from the rationalization process during an episode of cultural dissonance.

Cultural Dissonance and Perpetrator Behaviors

As discussed earlier, the cultural model explores the process of internalizing ideas and expectations of the outside world. It is the most widely shared- or widely pushed- ideas, and expectations among community members which eventually settle into cultural norms and provide members with guidelines for behavior. Nevertheless, even the most widely distributed norms are subject to change, break down, or are no longer effective in the regulation of human behaviors (Durkheim 1997). The values that members of a community attribute to their social norms do not easily dissipate even after norms collapse. When one's internalized values misalign with current cultural norms, members of that community are susceptible to perceive their

condition as generally incoherent and demoralizing. This struggle between values and situation is known as cultural dissonance (Hart and Spiprakash 2018).

With the experience of cultural dissonance comes an equal desire to minimize or reduce the chasm between internalized values and structural conditions, which requires that either one's values or the structure itself be altered. Since the former is easier to produce than the latter, most culturally dissonant persons will opt to amend their values. Since values and social behaviors reinforce one another, once someone's values have changed, their social behaviors change soon after; and after social behaviors have changed, values are likely to change as well (Lewin 1948:38). Such may explain the initial and progressively dehumanizing actions taken by the ordinary men who became the willing executioners of the Holocaust.

Most persons will not willing abandon their culturally prescribed values without first finding or forging meaning to rationalize this shift in perspective, a process known as moral justification (Waller 2002:188). Without actually using the terms cultural dissonance or moral justification, Christopher Browning supplies a number of rationalization techniques that the men of ORPO 101 may have used to forge meaning behind their actions. Common justifications include unit comradery, pressure to conform, and the routinization of killing assignments.

James Waller and Robert Zajonc explain that once unit comradery has been established, it becomes easier for persons to exaggerate their differences with others. Not only can this fuel preexisting ethnocentrism and xenophobia, but also it may awaken an innate desire to preserve one's community, thus justifying mass murder (Waller 2002:186-188). Under such conditions, the socialization between unit members may become one of "the most dangerously manipulable facets of war psychology that promote genocide," (Waller 2002:155).

Pressure to conform goes beyond mere peer pressure as it involves the deindividuation of unit members. Deindividuation refers to the process in which an individual actor comes to view themselves as a member of the group first, and as an individual second (Darley and Latane 1968). Similarly, when the responsibility of an act is shared among members of the group, the individual is more likely to diminish the product of their personal contribution (Milgram 1977). In the context of holocaust perpetration, the individual participant is more likely to view themselves as a cog in the machine, rather than a free agent who willingly participated in mass murder (Milgram 1977, Darley and Latane 1968, Durkheim 1997). The deindividualization process becomes more radical when the behavior becomes habitual and routinized.

Wendy Stallard Flory explains that, "with very few exceptions, people have an intense, instinctive, unconscious aversion to and anxiety about killing other humans," (Lerner et al. 1997). To be able to persist in torturous and murderous activities without becoming psychologically overwhelmed, rationalization strategies have to persist alongside the killing process. The individual comes to view their behavior not as an action derived from the self, but as an expression of the self as part of a community. Subsequently, the individual, through their action, is asking that the community recognize and accept their contribution to the group (Goffman 1959:30,77).

Members who have a particular aversion to their expectant community behavior are likely to overcompensate their initial hesitations with more fervent action (Goffman 1959:30). This may serve as explanation for the particular brutality of some perpetrators. Similarly, participants who have put in the cognitive energy required to minimize their cultural dissonance will not readily or easily shift back towards their former state of incoherence. It is more sustainable for the individual's cognitive energy resources to ignore information that may

discredit or disrupt their rationalization process (Goffman 1959:141, Mills 2000:28-31). That is to say, once the killing has started, the individual must keep up their charade if they are to keep cultural dissonance at bay.

Conclusion

Daniel Johan Goldhagen's controversial 1996 work, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, was met with mixed reception among non-academics and was largely criticized among academic circles. His questionable methodology and simplistic, monocausal conclusion, in conjunction with the book's widespread distribution, prompted a heated academic debate. The Goldhagen Debate has become an interdisciplinary conversation with contributors throughout the humanities. Even so, contributions from sociological scholars and academics is limited. With this work I hope to continue this conversation, promote its expansion across the humanities, thereby expanding the interdisciplinary community of scholars and academics who are committed to the fight against genocide.

Parting Thoughts

Despite my above criticisms, Goldhagen's controversial work has compelled numerous readers to ask themselves why it is that "the only genocide about which people routinely assert that the killers did not hold the death of the victims to be desirable and just is the Holocaust?" (Goldhagen et al. 1996). Rather than attempt to answer this question, I leave you with the following statement which I implore all readers to reflect:

> One undeniably unique feature of the Holocaust-or, better said, its "reception"-is the outrage and emotion that the very act of questioning its uniqueness continues to engender. Why might that be the case? The sheer scale of death and destruction wrought by Germany over the past century has no doubt attracted so much attention in the West because it was death and destruction wrought by one of the world's most "advanced" and "civilized" nations against other civilized nations

and groups. Is that not what most distinguishes German savagery from the barbarous acts committed by other Westerners, namely, those who instead chose to impose their will, not seldom with brute force, on the "racially inferior" living in, say, Africa, Asia, or the Americas? And if that is true, does what some consider to be a disproportional preoccupation with German crimes against humanity reflect a subconscious belief that some human lives are somehow more valuable than others? My intention is not to call into question the horror or unique nature of the Holocaust. But to be unique does not necessarily mean to be more horrible, (Port 2017).

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