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**HOW CAN THE PAST BE WRONGED? THE «HOLOCAUST INDUSTRY»  
AND MORAL CAPITAL<sup>1</sup>**

*A claim in recent discussion of what has been called the «Holocaust Industry» is that the Nazi Holocaust has been used as a source of «moral capital»: a commodity to be appropriated for political effect in the competition for resources, public attention and influence. The implication is that this is an «abuse» of the past, distinguished from another, more authentic, ethical, or critical sort of relationship that we might have to it. This article considers possible (and problematic) dimensions of a distinction between true and exploitative relations to the past. I make two main claims. One is that the possibility of «doing justice» (in both an ethical and a representational sense) to the past indeed depends on there being an available contrast between its use for moral capital and a genuine attention to its specificity – as does the more problematic business of learning lessons from historical events. A second claim is that adequately considering what the second might mean requires way of approaching «remembrance» which is at odds with both «traditional» (positivist) and postmodernist views of the nature of history.*

If there is a truth, it is that truth is a stake in struggles

*Pierre Bourdieu [3. P. 118]*

**1. Abusing the past: the very idea**

Can memory be misappropriated? Can the past be stolen? Can history be sold? A «yes» in response to each of these questions seems assumed in much contemporary discourse about the past and our relationship to it. Put like this, it carries a negative charge: a wrong is committed in treating events of the past *instrumentally*, like property – as «moral capital» to be exchanged for political, propagandistic or financial gain, or as a symbol of a special status claimed by its bearer. Frank Furedi, striking an already reverberating note, has written that «today, remembering the Holocaust has been transformed into an official ritual that allows every sanctimonious politician to put their superior moral virtues on public display»<sup>2</sup> [4. P. 21]. In addressing the nature and implications of such a claim,

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<sup>1</sup> Aspects of the discussion here are echoed in [1. Ch. 4] – a specific argument about the implications of Rorty's pragmatism for historiography – and in [2]. I am grateful to Bob Brecher, Norman Geras, Christopher Norris and Kalle Pihlainen for opportunities to discuss these ideas in various contexts, and for their own thoughts on them. I would like especially to thank my father, Angus Calder, for a string of conversations over the years shedding all kinds of light on the issues raised here.

<sup>2</sup> History is cast here, one might say, as a tool or prop: the sort of device deployed, in other contexts, by European and other politicians in their current happy propensity to apologise for (say) their country's imperial past, and so score relatively costless political points. I'm thinking here, amid a raft of recent examples, of Tony Blair's apology to the Irish people for Britain's role in the famine of 1845-9; Bill Clinton's apology to the people of western Africa for slavery; Japan's apology to European war veterans for their treatment during World War 2; and Pope John Paul II's 2000 apology for the wrongs committed in the name of Roman Catholicism during the previous two millennia. To call these «costless» is not to imply that there is nothing given in the gesture; rather, it is to take the (admittedly cynical) view that more was gained than lost by the apologizers – that such apologies are undertaken for reasons of political gain as much as genuine contrition.

we need to acknowledge, but mostly to sidestep, a clutch of attendant vexed questions arising from debates about the Nazi holocaust's uniqueness as a historical event that will always haunt any such discussion<sup>1</sup>. It might be that the terms must be different when discussing this particular case. But this does not, as I hope to show, remove the import of the question: how might we distinguish between legitimate, morally acceptable appeals to the past, and on the other hand its exploitation?

Implied in any charge that the past has, or might be, *abused* is that there is a «truer», more «authentic» relationship to be had with it. To be more precise: that there is a sense in which we can talk about historical events without committing the wrong of using them as means to present ends, and that it is only in this sense that their full significance can be registered. The stakes need not be political in a formal sense for such a wrong to be committed. It is alleged just as often of populist or inappropriate aesthetic representation, in films or museums. A recent article by Stanley Cohen gives an inventory of typical allegations in connection with the Nazi holocaust: «exploitation, sentimentality, simplification, dumbing-down, kitsch, pornography, Spielberg-clones, products of the Holocaust industry, Disneyland theme parks, death-camp chic, etc». As it happens, Cohen's own verdict is that often, «this condemnation is too glib and elitist: the usual whining of moral and intellectual entrepreneurs who believe they own the past and only they can understand its complexity»<sup>2</sup> [5. P. 45].

Cohen may have a point here – but so, I think, do the «whiners». I want to suggest that there can indeed be a sort of wrong in the reduction of the specific significance of past events to the uses presently made of them. Now this, straight off, might seem a strange sort of claim. By itself, aside from our appropriations, interpretations and so on, the past might seem to have no significance whatsoever. Talking of it as something wrongable might seem a rather extravagant sort of anthropomorphism. As post-modern history theorist Keith Jenkins presents this view, «in and for itself» there is nothing for us to get out of [the past] other than that which we have put into it» [6. P. 3]. On these terms, the past simply *is* an instrument of the present, such that there is no available sense in which we are *not* using it for present purposes. This view is mistaken, I think, for reasons I return to later on, but can be stated briefly here. It rules out of court, in Cohen's terms, the possibility of understanding abuse of the past (call it exploitation, sentimentalization, kitsch-ifying, or whatever) in a way which *isn't* glib and elitist. This possibility depends, I think on there being a distinction – however difficult to nail down – between our interpretation, appropriation, or simply our memory of the past and the events themselves. Peter Novick has suggested just such a distinction in terms of a sense of «historicity»: «Historical consciousness, by its nature, focuses on the *historicity* of events – that they took place then and not now, that they grew out of circumstances different from those that now obtain. Memory, by contrast, has no

<sup>1</sup> In what follows I will move between «Nazi holocaust» and «The Holocaust» in describing that event. Neither term is meant in itself to prejudice the uniqueness issue, adequate coverage of which, as I say, would need far fuller exploration than is possible here.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen's point here raises a string of questions – Is «moral capital» such that it requires scarcity value, and so wanes with the wider dissemination of understanding? Is it in some sense derived from, or proportionate to, power? – which there is not the space to address in the present paper.

sense of the passage of time; it denies the «pastness» of its objects and insists on their continuing presence<sup>1</sup> [7. P. 4].

«Memory», in Novick's sense, reduces the ontological separateness of past events to the uses which are presently made of them. How, then, do we talk about, draw lessons from, commemorate or otherwise invoke the events of the past *without* treating them instrumentally – in a way which does justice to their historicity? In what follows, I consider this question in the context of recent, contentious discussion – in works by Novick and by Norman Finkelstein – of what has been called the «Holocaust industry». One claim I'd like to make is that the possibility of «doing justice» (in both an ethical and a representational sense) to the past depends on our addressing history as a reality in important senses independent of its subsequent representation, or its mediation through discourse. In turn, this depends on there being an available contrast between its use for moral capital and a retrieval of what Novick calls the «historicity» of past events. There must be a sense (a non-mystical sense) in which we can violate the past itself, and not just (in Novick's sense) memories of it. I make a further suggestion: that the possibility of drawing lessons from past events depends, too, on an adequate sense of its historicity. Novick and Finkelstein are right that the Holocaust should not be used as moral capital. But Novick's underlying philosophical assumptions seem less conducive, and Finkelstein's more so, when it comes to evaluating the kind of wrong that such a use amounts to, and the scope for *legitimate* lesson-learning.

## 2. The «Holocaust Industry»

In different, provocative ways, both Novick and Finkelstein have shown how the Nazi Holocaust has been used as a source of moral capital: a bargaining chip in the competition for resources and for public attention<sup>2</sup> [7, 8]. Both have concerned themselves with the history of cultural treatment of the Holocaust, rather than with «the events themselves». The language and imagery of the Holocaust have, on these terms, indeed become a sort of property, or commodity, available for ideological appropriation. The implication – untheorized by either author but the source of much of the rhetorical force of their respective cases – is that, again, this is an «abuse» of the past, distinguished from another, more «authentic», ethical, or critical sort of relationship that we might have to it<sup>3</sup>.

Thematically, Finkelstein's case takes its cue from Israeli writer Boas Evron's observation that «Holocaust awareness [is actually] an official, propagandistic indoctrination, a churning out of slogans and a false view of the world, the real aim of which is not at all an understanding of the past, but a manipulation of the

<sup>1</sup> Originally published in the USA in 1999 as «The Holocaust in American Life».

<sup>2</sup> Note that the term «Holocaust industry» is Finkelstein's, rather than Novick's – the latter prefers to talk in terms of its «institutionalization».

<sup>3</sup> I should confess that my response to these works is, on one level, somewhat muddled. While Novick's, it seems to me, is much the more impressively researched, even-handed, analytical and detailed account, I have problems with many of its conclusions, and indeed its philosophical undertones. And while Finkelstein's work is bitty, sometimes over-polemical and rather selective in its focus, its concerns, it seems to me, are valid ones, and fit rather better with my own argument here.

present»<sup>1</sup> [8. P. 41]. The spur for this endeavour was provided less by concern for Holocaust survivors than by political imperatives. Pointing to the long period of post-war inattention in the United States, even amongst Jews, to the Nazi holocaust, his case is basically this: that the Holocaust became an interest (in both senses of the word) for the American Jewish establishment only after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. At this stage, it became expedient to cast Israel as a «victim» state, born of a unique catastrophe and thereby permitted, somehow, to flout international law and human rights conventions in its aggression against the Palestinians. Subsequently, with a fully-grown industry installed to exploit the «uniqueness» of Jewish suffering in order to divert attention from Israeli misconduct, its attention was turned to possibilities for straightforwardly commercial gain. Using greatly inflated numbers of Holocaust survivors, the industry has pursued financial and government agencies in Switzerland, Germany and latterly eastern Europe for compensation – supposedly on behalf of those survivors, but, in practice, primarily to line its own pockets. Finkelstein presents this as extortion, in the name not of needy victims (including his own parents, now dead, both victims of the Warsaw ghetto and of the Nazi concentration camps) but of ideological interests. If he's right, it is thus, in the terms discussed above, an abuse of the past.

Much of Finkelstein's technique hinges on identifying rhetorical deceits and hypocrisies. Thus, US politicians will invoke «a responsibility for actions taken by forebears» of the now living when appealing to the Swiss to be «generous» in their financial compensation, while ridiculing African-American appeals for compensation for the slavery endured by their own ancestors<sup>2</sup> [8. P. 105]. Thus also the overlooking by American interests of the fact that US banks have an inferior record to those in Switzerland in locating and dealing with dormant Holocaust-era accounts [8. P. 115–116]. Thus also the zeal with which compensation was sought by those interests, and the rather less distribution thereafter of the sums secured<sup>3</sup>. Thus also the use of the Holocaust, in the 1970s and 1980s, to protect quite unrelated (class, or corporate) Jewish interests, using anti-semitism as an allegation against initiatives – such as affirmative action programmes – perceived to be threatening to those interests<sup>4</sup>. Thus also the US's unwillingness to recognize genocides committed by its allies as recalling the Holocaust, while using Nazi comparisons rather more liberally in connection with its enemies in (for instance) Iraq, Cambodia or Serbia. And thus also (as a last example) the strategic inflation of the number of survivors to levels which would, with sobering irony, require that

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<sup>1</sup> See also the article, effectively a condensed version of the book [9. P. 120].

<sup>2</sup> The quoted words are former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's.

<sup>3</sup> Finkelstein's claim is that Jewish organizations have left undistributed \$1.25 billion paid over by Swiss banks as compensation [8. P. 115–116, 123]. This has duly been countered with the insistence that the money, though agreed upon, has yet to be transferred from Switzerland because the US courts have still to approve its distribution. See [10. P. 17].

<sup>4</sup> Finkelstein describes the process as follows: «Moving aggressively to defend their corporate and class interests, Jewish elites branded all opposition to their new conservative policies anti-Semitic. Thus ADL head Nathan Perlmutter maintained that the «real anti-Semitism» in America consisted of policy initiatives «corrosive of Jewish interests» such as affirmative action, cuts in the defence budget, and neo-isolationism, as well as opposition to nuclear power and even Electoral College reform» [8. P. 37].

the death-toll of the Nazi genocide was far less than anyone except professional Holocaust deniers would ever suggest<sup>1</sup>.

Something noticeable about the largely hostile reception which Finkelstein's book received on publication is that it consisted largely in the questioning of the author's character or motivations, or contestations of specific factual aspects of his case<sup>2</sup>. That is to say, the moral logic of his case – put conditionally: *if* the following claims are true, *then* the «Holocaust industry» exploits Jewish suffering, and this is a bad thing – remained pretty much untouched. This is important, I think – and a point to which I'll return later on.

Novick's account, meanwhile, revolves around the claim that American Jewish culture has been warped and damaged by an intensifying preoccupation with the Holocaust. The preoccupation's effect has been to centre that culture's sense of communal identity *negatively*, on mourning, rather than on a more affirmative focus. The claim runs deeper, though: that it is *American* needs which have shaped dominant views of the Holocaust, and ensured its peculiar prominence as a moral exemplar. Before the mid-1960s, there were no monuments to the Nazi holocaust in the US, and in fact most major Jewish organizations opposed such memorialization. Novick explains this, in essence, as a symptom of the priority of conformism and assimilation among US Jews in the aftermath of World War 2, and relatedly, of the general American political climate of the time [7. P. Ch. 4]. He charts the ways in which contemporary concerns and priorities (the Cold War, affairs in Israel, the degree of Jewish influence in cultural life, the concentration on victimhood as a political strategy) have shaped the profile and function of the Holocaust in American life – rather than, again, the events themselves. His concern is with the way in which the Holocaust has become an *American* collective memory, crucial to how American Jews «understand and represent themselves». His point is that this is a sort of misappropriation: «The Holocaust is simply too remote from the experience of Americans for it to perform this function» [7. P. 278–279]. His work chimes with Finkelstein's in tracing the emergence of the Holocaust as an American possession, central to that nation's consciousness, to the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars. More particularly, it served as a means of mobilizing support for the Israeli cause, by reviving fading memories of the Jewish tragedy. «While

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<sup>1</sup> As Finkelstein puts it: «The standard claim is that the Final Solution was a uniquely efficient, assembly-line, industrial extermination. But if, as the Holocaust industry suggests, many hundreds of thousands of Jews survived, the Final Solution couldn't have been so efficient after all. It must have been a haphazard affair – exactly what Holocaust deniers argue. *Les extrêmes se touchent*» [8. P. 128].

<sup>2</sup> Finkelstein's book provoked an immediate, hostile reaction on its publication – and serialization in *The Guardian* – in July 2000. In that newspaper, Jonathan Freedland contended that Finkelstein's book «reads like a rant, with splenetic attacks on individuals, many of them survivors, and vast generalizations about the whole of world Jewry» – and that Finkelstein himself «appears to have nothing but contempt for his own people», that he lends impetus to the cause of Holocaust deniers, that he «does the anti-semites» work for them', that his approach is «closer to the people who created the Holocaust than to those who suffered in it» [11. P. 22]. Subsequently, on the letters page [12], Finkelstein's case was dismissed or condemned as «demagoguery», as «an ill-considered outburst», as aiming «to shock rather than provide accurate information». (Although it should be noted that voices raised for and against were, in terms of published letters, fairly even in number.) Factual disputes emerged over both the data he uses, and about that which he doesn't include – for a sample, see Rayner, «Finkelstein's List».

American Jewish organizations could do nothing to alter the recent past in the Middle East, and precious little to affect its future, they *could* work to revive memories of the Holocaust. So the «fading memories» explanation offered an agenda for action» [7. P. 155]. And a source of identity: where direct religious appeal might no longer work, the Holocaust, as one Jewish benefactor put it, «The Holocaust works every time». It was thus a strategic asset to be hung onto, a card to be played.

A salient point in Novick's textured, detailed work is that the Holocaust was increasingly treated less as history, and more as a sort of all-purpose source of moral lessons. He disputes this possibility, and thinks that it demeans the event itself. This, again, is a point to be returned to later. In the meantime, I'd like to address an aspect of both Finkelstein's and Novick's analyses which goes largely unexplored in their own accounts. It is this: that the Holocaust is seen something that can be misappropriated – or else, that its appropriation for given ends is suspect *in itself*. Novick seems to waver on this second claim, but certainly a dominant theme of his book is that the Holocaust can't do the work which American Jewry requires of it. Finkelstein invokes the memory of his own parents – and their own desire to treat the Holocaust as *history*, as something unfit for public spectacle – to suggest that the very common currency of the Holocaust in its present culturally disseminated form is an affront to its victims<sup>1</sup> [8. P. 5–7]. The shared (though largely implicit) point here is that the Holocaust should not be used as a source of moral capital at all, regardless of the purposes to which it is put.

### 3. «They are stealing the Holocaust from us»: lessons and appropriation

For both Finkelstein and Novick, crucial to the Nazi holocaust's use as moral capital is that it the legitimate and exclusive property of the Jews – such that use of the words «Holocaust» and «genocide» to describe other catastrophes defies the incomparability of the genocide of the Jews. Property, of course, can be stolen. Thus, as Finkelstein notes, the *New Yorker* titled its exposé of Benjamin Wilkomirski's fraudulent memoir «Stealing the Holocaust»<sup>2</sup>. Novick catalogues a litany of direct references to the «moral capital» deriving from the Holocaust which those who question its uniqueness have attempted to «rob», to «plunder», to «kidnap» or «appropriate» [7. P. 156]. Both link claims to this property as crucial to the maintenance of a certain victim status – and, for Finkelstein, «immunity to criticism, however justified» [8. P. 3].

For Finkelstein, this points to a need for a more rational engagement with the significance of the Nazi genocide, a more appropriately moral relationship to it which does not reduce its significance to that of a bargaining chip. «The challenge,» he says in concluding his book, «is to restore the Holocaust as a rational subject of inquiry. Only then can we really learn from it. ... The noblest gesture

<sup>1</sup> In a subsequent radio interview, Finkelstein frequently evoked the memory of his parents, their courage and will to survive despite their experiences, as a source of inspiration and critical measure [13].

<sup>2</sup> Novick quotes Elie Wiesel's objection that «they are stealing the Holocaust from us» as (for instance) a response to the use of the word «ghetto» for black slums in the US [8. P. 41]. Finkelstein cites Edward Alexander as framing this quite directly: «the uniqueness of The Holocaust is «moral capital»; Jews must «claim sovereignty» over this «valuable property» [7. P. 243].

for those who perished is to preserve their memory, learn from their suffering and let them, finally, rest in peace.» [8. P. 150]. None of this has been served by the Holocaust's appropriation as exclusively Jewish property, which for Finkelstein distracts from the fact that «In and of itself the Nazi holocaust does not serve any particular agenda» [8. P. 41].

Novick, on the other hand, seems not to allow that there might be a distinction between the drawing of legitimate and illegitimate moral implications from the Holocaust, precisely because the very idea of drawing lessons from history is for him too problematic to get off the ground. He gives much more extended treatment of the claim that we can learn anything in particular from rational engagement with the Holocaust. He rejects it, for a series of reasons, based largely on scepticism about the general idea that lessons can be drawn from history in the first place. They might be loosely summarized as follows. First, if we're seeking moral lessons of everyday application «the Holocaust would seem an unlikely source», because of its very extremity [7. P. 13]. Second, making the Holocaust «the benchmark of oppression and atrocity» or «the touchstone of moral and political discourse» means «trivializing crimes of lesser magnitude», and ushers in «disgusting» calculations of whether other events might be «truly holocaustal or merely genocidal»; «truly genocidal or merely atrocious» [7. P. 13]. Third, lessons drawn from are so diverse, and flatly contradictory, that they are either empty or illicitly imposed on the Holocaust. As examples, he gives a startlingly long list of general lessons often drawn [7. P. 239–242].

The Holocaust...

- is «a salutary reminder of the presence of evil in the world»;
- is «an antidote for innocence»;
- «serves to disabuse us of Enlightenment illusions about the «perfectibility of man» (George Bush Sr.)»;
- «explodes the popular belief in steady, irreversible progress»;
- «refutes the grand Renaissance illusion that man becomes better as he becomes more clever»;
- «brings the revelation that science and technology are not necessarily benevolent, or even neutral»;
- is «the symbol of «modernity», with its bureaucratic rationality and its division of labour, which fragments responsibility»;
- finds an equivalent in legalized abortion;
- finds an equivalent in anti-abortion campaign rhetoric;
- was made possible by the dominance of patriarchal values;
- teaches the dangers of «big government»;
- finds an equivalent in the fur trade, or indeed the meat industry;
- finds support in sociobiology;
- would not have happened if Germany had had the right to bear arms (Newt Gingrich);
- reinforces orthodox Christian teachings about family values.

A fourth point follows: that where the lessons are controversial, «they seem to be not so much lessons drawn *from* the Holocaust as brought *to* it. It did not *teach* George Bush «a dim view of human nature and human prospects», or about the dangers of big government, or whatever. He had those views already, and found

the Holocaust a useful prop in putting them across. And at any rate, fifthly, it is not clear how we could divide proper from improper lessons of the Holocaust, especially in light of the fact that those «who insist on the universal implications of the Holocaust» tend to be «equally insistent that nothing else is comparable to it», and so cannot expect its lessons to be directly applicable elsewhere [7. P. 243].

A final point made by Novick is that there are dangers in reducing historical catastrophes to easily packaged lessons, precisely because it denies the specificity of the events themselves. This has been the unfortunate by-product of increasing educational attention to the Holocaust: «In the end, it hardly seemed to matter whether one was learning the lessons of the Holocaust or the lessons of the Potato Famine, because the lessons were all pretty much the same: tolerance and diversity were good, hate was bad, the overall rubric was «man's inhumanity to man»» [7. P. 258–259]. On the contrary, says Novick, there is really nothing to be learned from the Holocaust «that will fit on a bumper sticker, and nothing to inspire». «Awe and horror when confronting the Holocaust – for the first time or the thousandth time; then, now, and forever – are surely appropriate. Yet no matter how broadly we interpret the word «lesson», that's not a lesson – certainly not a useful one» [7. P. 262]. One might relate this to a more general argument: that we should avoid squeezing the implications of past events into easy moral boxes in line with present priorities, or to make up for a shortfall in current moral resources<sup>1</sup>.

This last strikes me as perhaps the most forceful of Novick's points, and I'll reapproach it shortly. To the others, variously problematic, I'll respond in turn. Firstly, rejecting the Holocaust as a source of everyday moral guidance because of its very extremity is to object to its simplification or distillation into trite moral maxims, but not to the very idea that we might learn from it. Put differently, it is an objection only if we require everyday moral lessons from the Holocaust: it does not stand as a refutation of the very possibility of deriving lessons. Secondly, again, to draw lessons of contemporary resonance from the Holocaust *by no means* requires that we install it as some sort of crude yardstick by which to gauge relative atrocity. Thirdly, Novick's startling list of the lessons which have in fact been drawn is taken by him to signify that nothing about the Holocaust itself resists its interpretation in any given way: that since we can use it as we will, *any* lessons derived from it will be empty, and supply nothing further to the original point for which it is adduced as back-up. It provides no resistance to the uses to which it is put, and effectively becomes a sort of fifth wheel in the process. This, though, must mean that it cannot be *misappropriated*, and thus that «anything goes» in terms of the Holocaust's educational use. Yet the mere fact of its diverse appro-

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Karpf makes a version of this point thus: «As a culture, we've become grave-robbers, raiding the past for the ethical meanings – of good and evil – which the present can't supply, and which shouldn't be imposed from the Shoah.» [14]. Novick's own angle is more specific to the American context, arguing that «talk of uniqueness and incomparability surrounding the Holocaust in the United States ... promotes *evasion* of moral and historical responsibility. The repeated assertion that whatever the United States has done to blacks, Native Americans, Vietnamese, or others pales in comparison to the Holocaust is true – and evasive. And whereas a serious and sustained encounter with the history of hundreds of years of enslavement and oppression of blacks might imply costly demands on Americans to redress the wrongs of the past, contemplating the Holocaust is virtually cost-free: a few cheap tears» [7. P. 15].



priation as «moral capital» does not by itself prove that all of these appropriations are equally justified, or that all are equally empty, or that it cannot be more relevant to some claims than to others.

Fourth was his claim that *substantial*, as opposed to empty or platitudinous, lessons are not drawn *from* the Holocaust so much as imposed on it. It would be facile to dispute that this *has* been the case. But I have two points to make here. One is that it's a rather useless generalization to make. Zygmunt Bauman's linking of the Holocaust to «modernity», and the lessons he draws from this, is not (as it happens) a position with which I myself entirely agree [15]. But to say that his lessons are not «drawn from» the Holocaust would be mistaken: on the contrary, they are drawn precisely from available accounts of what actually did happen in the Nazi genocide. This is what gives his case its force. It does not prove that his lessons are correctly drawn, but it does prove that they are lessons. My second point is related, but more petty. Novick himself, towards the end of his book, makes the following claim: «There was... a disposition, before the Holocaust, to think of the most barbarous deeds as being the deeds of the most barbarous folk – the least cultured, the least advanced. We've learned from the Holocaust that that's wrong» [7. P. 262]. This is both resonant of much of what Bauman claims in his work, and is also, fairly obviously I'd have thought, a lesson. If lessons can't be drawn, then this breaks Novick's own rules. But in any case, it seems to me a perfectly reasonable, and important, and resonant claim to make. The views of George Bush Sr., as it happens, do not. I think this is precisely because deriving lessons from the Third Reich about the evils of «big government» in contemporary western economies is mistaken. Neither does this, though, imply that it is somehow *in principle* impossible.

Novick's fifth and sixth points seem to me to be more telling. Without wanting to venture too far sideways into the uniqueness debate, I think he's right in arguing that one implication of an insistence that the Holocaust is «unique» (rather than, say, unprecedented)<sup>1</sup> is that it can be analogous to nothing, and so is largely drained of its capacity to provide lessons. With such a case, as he points out, «Rigorous criteria of similarity are irrelevant: it's a matter of being *reminded* of the Holocaust when encountering some later atrocity or injustice, of that later instance evoking some of the emotions one feels about the Holocaust» [7. P. 243]. I think this is right, and I think too that Novick is right to imply that denying the Holocaust's uniqueness is not to deny its extremity or its specificity as an event. Where I think Novick goes wrong is in implying that uniqueness is a prerequisite for there being «universal implications of the Holocaust», or for lessons to be drawable at all. More on this later; meanwhile, turning to his sixth point, we might rephrase it thus: that in reducing the Holocaust to moral lessons, we deny what, specifically, makes it morally affecting. When addressing it with appropriate awe and horror, no lessons can be forthcoming. This recalls the more widespread argument that the sheer magnitude (whether empirical, or conceptual) of the Holocaust places it beyond the reach of rational understanding, and thus beyond that from which we can learn.

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<sup>1</sup> See, on this point [16. P. 17–28].

This sixth point seems to me to be half right, but again, to over-reach itself. To derive trite, homely moral maxims from the Holocaust, or to treat it as an ideologically convenient means of supporting particular political beliefs, are things of which we should rightly be very wary. They represent, indeed, the sort of use of the Holocaust as moral capital against which Novick, with good reason, marshals grave objections. Fine. But from this there is a disorientating leap to the conclusion that *there can be no lessons* from the Holocaust: that we can learn nothing from it, for instance in the desire to prevent anything like it happening again. I can't see the necessity of any such link, and indeed think the opposite follows. The force of the first point seems to be that there is such a thing as *mis-appropriating* the moral significance of the Holocaust. This does not require that all such appropriations are wrong. In fact, a stronger case against the *mis*-appropriation of the significance of the Holocaust would base itself in a judgement of how we might legitimately identify that significance.

This bends back in the direction of Finkelstein's rather more bitty, scattered comments on this general topic. They may or may not be warranted in terms of their veracity. But their *logic* is one that I would like to endorse: that understanding of the Holocaust must be possible in order for us to appreciate its moral significance, and that this itself is crucial to any intention to do justice to those who have been wronged.<sup>1</sup> This belief, we can infer, drives Finkelstein's conviction that the Holocaust has indeed been misappropriated and abused; that «Holocaust memory is an ideological construct» [8. P. 5]; that «Organized American Jewry has exploited the Nazi holocaust to deflect criticism of Israel's and its own morally indefensible policies» [8. P. 149]; and that «too many public and private resources have been invested in memorializing the Nazi genocide», when «Most of the output is worthless, a tribute not to Jewish suffering but to Jewish aggrandisement» [8. P. 8].

Again, whether or not Finkelstein is right about all this (and the American Jewish establishment is guilty as charged), the charge itself seems to me a valid one. If the Holocaust has served as a means of benefiting unrelated interests rather than those who directly suffered in it, then this is an abuse of it. In direct response to Novick's claims that the «very extremity» of the Holocaust makes it incapable of providing moral lessons, and that its installation as a «benchmark of oppression and atrocity» belittles other catastrophes, Finkelstein insists that lessons *can* be drawn. «[T]he Nazi holocaust can also sensitize us to these injustices. Seen through the lens of Auschwitz, what previously was taken for granted – for example, bigotry – can no longer be» [8. P. 148]. Thus, Finkelstein's case hinges on an implicit distinction between, on the one hand, the Holocaust's use as a contribution to moral understanding, and on the other hand, its appropriation as moral capital to be used for other purposes. Novick, having rejected the drawing of lessons as such, can provide no such distinction. And yet objecting, as both Finkelstein and Novick do, to the appropriation of the Holocaust as the property of a particular, geographically remote group (something subject to «copyright», as it were) seems itself to require exactly that.

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<sup>1</sup> See, on this point [16. P. 18].

This, though, might leave us back where we started. Even if the possibility of drawing lessons from the past is *desirable* – even if it is necessary in order for there to be a contrast-effect with illegitimate uses of the past – this doesn't prove that it's actually *possible*. In what remains, I consider how we might indeed bolster such a claim.

#### 4. Doing justice to the past

Having argued that the «mainstreaming» of Holocaust awareness has actually served to dilute it, Novick reaches the following conclusion: «In the United States, memory of the Holocaust is so banal, so inconsequential, not memory at all, precisely because it is so uncontroversial, so unrelated to real divisions in American society, so *apolitical*» [7. P. 278].

This is an odd sort of claim for Novick to make, in light of the passage on «historicity» I quoted in part 1. Memory, Novick says there, «has no sense of the passage of time; it denies the «pastness» of its object and insists on their continuing presence» [7. P. 4]. Thus, collective memory in contemporary America can hardly be upbraided for failing to provide the sort of deeper purchase on the Holocaust that he now regrets the absence of. It seems to me that his initial hunch about memory gives us something useful to work with in figuring out how we might do justice to the past.

I use «doing justice» here in a deliberately ambiguous sense. On the one hand, it signifies the possibility of paying moral attention to the suffering of the victims of catastrophe. On the other hand, but inseparably I think, it has an epistemological aspect: like a photograph can fail to do its subject justice, so our representations of, and understandings of, past events, can succeed or fail in capturing what makes them specifically what they are. This opens, to be sure, a sizeable can of worms, and returns us to (amongst other questions) the issue of whether the Holocaust is uniquely *unrepresentable*, or *incomprehensible*, as a historical event. A good deal has, of course, been written – by Theodor Adorno and by post-structuralist theorists as well as by the Jewish tradition – to suggest that our self-reassuring sense of the possibility of rational explanation is pulled up short by the sheer ineffability of the Nazi genocide. Suffice it to say that, as will already be clear, I think that installing any historical event as an ineffable noumenon places it beyond what we can draw moral lessons from. Characterizing our relationship to the past in terms of memory, I suggest, has a similar effect.

To show what I mean, we might inspect a fairly familiar-sounding claim, made in a recent issue of *History Today*: «As citizens, we are under a moral imperative to remember events which should not be forgotten» [17. P. 15]. This claim is no less laudable for being difficult in three obvious respects. Where does this moral imperative come from? What *is* remembrance (as opposed to memory, or forgetting)? And how do we decide which events should not be forgotten? In fact, the claim as put totters on the edge of toothless circularity. There is a moral imperative to remember events which should not be forgotten, which events which we can only settle upon on the back of their being remembered, which itself appears to be the upshot of an ethical imperative. It seems to me that one way of avoiding this circularity – and to preserve what is most important and worthwhile

in the claim – is to shore up a distinction between «memory», on the one hand, and «remembrance» on the other<sup>1</sup>.

I'll put it bluntly, and briefly: memory has nothing to do with truth or justice, whereas remembrance has. There is no contradiction, as A. C. Grayling notes, «in regarding a given mental experience as a memory, with there yet being no reliable connection between it and a past event» [19]. Remembrance, on the other hand, has a critical aspect. It is a practice to be decided upon. It involves values, agency, interests, discrimination. It is a judgement on what is worthy of commemoration – a judgement for which we can be held to account. More than that, remembering is itself a sort of holding the past to account. Thus, it can be true or false. It has a cognitive, rational aspect. And thus, because it is directly related to our *understanding* of the past, it links directly in to our capacity to do justice to it.

If remembrance has something to do with truth, while memory doesn't necessarily, then what Novick objects to in contemporary America's «banal», «inconsequential» relationship to the Holocaust might better be seen as a failure of *remembrance*, rather than memory. For his argument is that the inconsequentiality of the Holocaust in American life stems from the fact that it is recognized, and its influence is felt, despite the widespread lack of a real understanding of its causes, its conditions, and so forth. So it has a sort of inauthentic status, divorced from the specific conditions of its significance, floating free with no particular anchor in the events to which «the Holocaust» refers. It is this anchorlessness, one might argue, which makes it so readily malleable, and allows it to be freely appropriated as moral capital and used for ulterior purposes.

Now some – Keith Jenkins among them – would argue that this applies to *all* discourse about the past: that it is simply a set of free-floating signifiers, unconstrained by what actually happened. «Left on its own», as he puts it, the past «has no discoverable point», «expresses no intelligible rhyme or reason», «consists of nothing independent of us that we *have* to be loyal to», «no truths we *have* to respect», «no problems we *have* to solve», and so on [6. P. 3]. It is entirely a fictional construction. As I've argued at greater length elsewhere, this approach simply inverts the classical fact/value distinction beloved of positivist approaches to historiography, which would have us seek the facts, and nothing but the facts, in a purely «scientific», value-neutral manner<sup>2</sup>. Though apparently opposing, both camps have a tendency to reduce the past it is possible to talk about to our current representations of it – as discourse, or «the facts», or whatever. It's a curious form of idealism which, as Christopher Norris puts it, denies any possible distinction between «history» as that which actually occurred quite apart from our current best state of knowledge concerning it and «history» as that which historians recount from their various (no doubt partial and prejudiced) viewpoints» [20. P. 25]. For Jenkins, collapsing this gap leads inexorably to the conclusion that the past, as such, can teach us nothing we don't know already: it is, after all, simply what we have decided it to be.

I think Jenkins is right here. The very possibility of lessons – and of distinguishing between legitimate appeals to, and exploitative abuses of, the past – does

<sup>1</sup> I have set out this distinction at greater length in other papers, most notably [18] and in [2].

<sup>2</sup> See, again [2].

indeed require that gap between ontology and epistemology which he's happy enough to collapse. That's why we shouldn't collapse it. We will not always be aware of the full magnitude of past events. But that does not licence their being written off, *a priori*, as beyond the reach of inquiry. Indeed, to know that they are, ultimately, either ontologically unique or beyond the range of that from which we can learn, would require a degree of complete knowledge available only to those who would happily collapse historicity into memory, or the events of the past into what we happen currently to be saying about them. Learning, and distinguishing fair from foul uses of the past, requires keeping that channel open. The possibility of truth requires that we might now be wrong, perhaps radically wrong, about the past. And the possibility of truth is required for any «responsibility to remember» to have substance and purchase.

Truth and moral capital are related on two immediate levels. Firstly, a degree of credibility is required for a version of the past to function as moral capital: for it to have the necessary rhetorical force. Secondly, the very phrase «moral capital» has a pejorative loading: it implies an ideological element, in the sense distinguished from a «true», perhaps «pure» moral aspect. I'd make a third claim. This is that dissolving the fact/value distinction diffused throughout both positivist and post-modernist assumptions about our relations to the events of the past means that we can dissolve the claim that truth must be somehow divorced from all ethical concerns (i.e., must be neutral) to be *truly* true. Crucial for our ethical relations to it is that the past is neither reified, nor installed as a sort of ineffable noumenon, nor reduced to the present. In neglecting the complexity and specificity of historical catastrophes, we lose touch precisely with the separate, particular aspects of their happening which lend them their moral weight in the first place. If there is an ethical lesson of the «Holocaust industry», then that, I would argue, is it.

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