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Das Ereignis Auschwitz: the Ontology of Modernity

Thus far the Polish reader has had no opportunity to become acquainted with the important voices in the debate of the 1980s and 1990s concerning the philosophical and political implications of the Holocaust.¹ Alan Milchman's and Alan Rosenberg's *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokauście. Auschwitz, nowoczesność i filozofia*,² brings

¹ I am referring primarily to the significant books by French philosophers: Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique. Heidegger, l'art et la politique*; J. Derrida, *De l'esprit. Heidegger et la question*; J.-F. Lyotard, *Heidegger et "la juifs"* and *Le Différend*; L. Ferry and A. Renault *Heidegger et les Modernnes*; S. Kofman, *paroles siถoquées*; and the most important English language voices in the debate, such as: S. Friedlander's, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay On Kitsch and Death and Memory, History and the Extermination of Jews of Europe*; Y. Bauer, *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective*; D. LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz and Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*; B. Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide and Holocaust Representation. Art within the Limits of History and Ethics*. The Polish reader had the opportunity to become acquainted with the German debate, with contributions from D.J.K. Peukert, D. Diner, and J. Habermas, in the anthologies: *Historikerstreit. Spór o miejsce III Rzeszy w historii Niemiec*, ed. M. Łukasiewicz, Londyn, 1990, and *Nazizm, Trzecia Rzesza a procesy modernizacyjne*, sel. and ed. H. Orłowski, Poznań, 2000. Among the more important texts the only one fully translated into Polish is Z. Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cornell University Press, 2001, translated in 1992, which inspired a heated debate.

² A. Milchman, A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokauście. Auschwitz, nowoczesność i filozofia*, trans. L. Krowicki, J. Szacki, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warsaw, 2003. [The book has not been published in English, references are to the Polish edition.]

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a flashback of that discussion, relating to the key issues of the debate: the problem of the exceptional and universal character of the Holocaust; the fiasco of “the project of the Enlightenment” and the end of the idea of progress; “the case of Heidegger”³ (which had a continuation a few years later in “the case of Paul de Man”); the problem of memory and forgetting in the public sphere: anamnestic solidarity with the murdered, the official historical discourse, the problem of the “excess of memory,” and the phenomenon of “traumatized memory,” which locks individuals in the trap of posthistory.⁴

For the authors the key issue remains the relationship between the “technology” of the Holocaust, that is, the totality of the social and technical infrastructure which made it possible, and the internal logic of modernization. Milchman and Rosenberg perceive the Holocaust as a modern, science informed “transformative event”:

In our appropriation of Dan Diner's term *das Ereignis Auschwitz* we want to preserve the Heideggerian sense of disclosure or lack of concealment and also the emphasis on some features which...we ascribe to *Ereignis*, features which would have been concealed were we simply to talk of an event or an incident: firstly, the *progressive* character of the event...secondly, its *coming*, its approaching us, something *pointing toward the future*; thirdly the fact that the stake here is disclosure – in the sense of revelation – of something *important*, something *transformative* in its influence on humankind.⁵

Das Ereignis Auschwitz is what is about to come, an event whose consequences have not been fully revealed, but model the unpredictable future shape of the political sphere. Introducing this topic into the larger discussion is undoubtedly the most important contribution made by the authors. The relationship between “Modernity and the Holocaust” has been addressed

³ In fact, “the case of Heidegger” had a large response in Poland. The discussion on the topic begun in *Znak*, 1974, no 6(24), to broaden in scope after the famous interview with the philosopher, “Tylko Bóg może nas uratować” [Only God may save us] appeared in *Teksty* 1977, no 3(33) (first published in *Der Spiegel*, May 31, 1976). An important role was played by *Aletheia*, 1990 1(4) titled *Heidegger dzisiaj* [Heidegger today] devoted to the topic and containing a broad range of materials, including texts from *Le Nouvel Observateur* (1988) and from the Frankfurt anthology edited by J. Altweig *Die Heidegger kontroverse* (1988) that is, commentary belonging to the new phase of the discussion initiated by the publication of Victor Farias' book. Among the Polish publications it is worth mentioning C. Widziński's *Heidegger i problem zła* [Heidegger and the problem of evil], 1994. V. Farias's *Heidegger and Nazism* was published in Polish as *Heidegger and National Socialism* in 1997 with an introductory essay by J. Habermas, reprinted from the German edition. Among other publications, there were: J. Young, *Heidegger, Philosophy, Nazism* (published in Polish in 2000 as *Heidegger, filozofia, nazizm*); H. Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life* (published in Polish in 1997 as *Martin Heidegger. W drodze ku biografi*); and O. Pöggeler, *Martin Heidegger's Path of Thinking* (published in Polish in 2002 as *Droga myślowa Martina Heideggera*).

⁴ For a broader discussion of this phenomenon see: A. Leder, “Przemoc, krzywdą i racjonalność. W horyzoncie myśli Waltera Benjamina,” *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 2003, no 3.

⁵ A. Milchman and A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty...*

in detail before.⁶ This time emphasis is placed on “the transformative potential” of the event of the Holocaust, that is, a redefinition it has triggered of the fundamental perceptions of the future. For it is a significant fact, as Arendt emphasizes in relation to genocide, that what happened once may happen again. The possibility of a repetition of what, until the moment it happened, had seemed impossible (unthinkable), and thus was not a part of a possible future, begins to define the horizon of the future and indirectly determines all our projects from the moment it became reality. This possibility of a repetition is the more probable the easier it will be in successive generations “to forget the holes of oblivion, the mass manufacture of corpses.”⁷ As Zygmunt Bauman points out, “We know now that we live in a type of society that made the Holocaust possible, and that *contained nothing which could stop the Holocaust from happening*”⁸ (emphasis mine, TM). When it comes to the study of the Holocaust, even if that had not been clear from the beginning, “Much more [has been] involved in such a study than the tribute to the memory of the murdered millions, settling the account with the murderers, and healing the still-festered moral wounds of the passive and silent witnesses.” Reflection on the Holocaust itself is not enough to prevent its return. “Yet without such a study, we would not even know how likely and improbable such a return might be.”⁹ The future dimension of the Holocaust is an ever open threat of repetition on a scope impossible to determine and in a shape difficult to predict, as implied by the modern biotechnologies and means of digital control. The reality of such possibility remains “suspended,” but the fact that, as Ernst Bloch argues, this possibility is objectively potentially real places permanent pressure on the political present.¹⁰ When we become aware of it, the threat of the future means the necessity to act for the transformation of the current state of the public sphere. This necessity is ethically grounded and the shape of the approaching future depends on the degree to which the modern reflection on the motifs of the genocidal *universum* will be able to transform the ethical and political ideas that determine the framework of human coexistence.

Thought experiments we have engaged in and the new truths they could generate are related to the very perspective of *transforming our existence, our being*. This adventure also contains the possibility of changing the social and cultural matrix.¹¹ (emphasis mine, TM)

Philosophy that undertakes the task of rethinking Auschwitz is for these authors an engagement “in which critique and the impossibility of separating it from practice, would

⁶ R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) New York, 1985; Z. Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cornell University Press, 2001; D.J.K. Peukert, “The Genesis of the ‘Final Solution’ from the Spirit of Science,” 1994; R. Zitelman, “Die Totalitäre Seite der Moderne, 1991.

⁷ H. Arendt, „Concluding Remarks“ to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951, 430.

⁸ Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cornell University Press, 2001, 87.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ A. Milchman and A. Rosenberg, *Ekaperymenty...*, 14-15.

¹¹ Ibid., 21-2.

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shape the activity of thinking.”¹² *Das Ereignis Auschwitz* remains a transformative event insofar as “thinking about Auschwitz” itself means an interior transformation of thought (*metanoia*) and the resulting transformation of the basic categories of culture. It is no accident that the contemporary relevance of the Holocaust mentioned earlier remains the premise of the ethical duty to “transform thought.”

Holocaust has opened the doors to the genocidal *universum*, a “world” in which mass death inflicted by people becomes the constitutive feature of the social and political life. At the beginning of the new century...this door remains open.¹³

Thinking about Auschwitz is transformative here because it takes up what is of contemporary relevance to us, and therefore what is a constitutive, if unnamed, moral, practical, and political dimension of life.

The point is not therefore the analysis of truth, but what one could call the ontology of contemporaneity, the ontology of ourselves and, it seems to me, that the philosophical choice confronting us today is the following: one could opt for critical philosophy that would represent itself as an analytical philosophy of truth, or for critical thought that takes the form of an ontology of ourselves, an ontology of the present. This is the form of philosophy that from Hegel, through Nietzsche and Max Weber, to the Frankfurt School has founded the form of reflection within which I attempt to work as well.¹⁴

Most likely this is the form of thinking within which the authors of *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokauście* would situate themselves as well.

One of the basic spheres that have changed under the influence of the reflection on Auschwitz is the modern form of understanding time and the awareness of history based on this understanding. For it is a challenge to historical discourse to confront what for ethical, political, or religious reasons does not simply recede into the past, but situates itself “vertically” in relation to the historical-narrative continuum. Holocaust has “fallen out of history” in precisely that way, remaining “transhistorically suspended” due to the triple ethical, political, and religious motivation. Permanently modern, incapable of being thought as something that passes and recedes in time, the Shoah is a stone of stumbling and a challenge for historiography.¹⁵ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in *La fiction du politique*

¹² Ibid., 23.

¹³ Ibid., 12

¹⁴ M. Foucault, „Kant i problem aktualności,” trans. B. Banasiak, *Pismo Literacko-Artystyczne*, 1987, no 6, 75. (After Polish translation KM)

¹⁵ On the subject of religious discourse after the Shoah, see: Rabbi Byron L. Sherwin, *Sparks Amidst the Ashes: the Spiritual Legacy of Polish Jewry*, Oxford University Press, 1997; A. Ravitzky, “Wpływ Holocaustu na współczesną ortodoksyjną myśl żydowską,” *Res Publica Nowa*, 2001, no 8. The implications of adopting the “transhistorical” perception of the Holocaust for the public sphere and political practice in Israel is discussed by Y. Zerubavel in “The Death of Memory and Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors,” in: *Representations* 1994, no 45, and S. Friedländer, “Memory of the Shoah in Israel: Symbols, Rituals, and Ideological Polarization,” in: *The Art Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, ed. J. E. Young, The Jewish Museum, New York – Munich, Prestel, 1994.

and Jean Francois Lyotard in *Heidegger et 'les juifs,'*” offer the classic ethical argument demonstrating the supra-historical character of the Holocaust as “the fault-line cutting across the continuity of western history.” For the former, quoted by Milchman and Rosenberg, the Shoah is a caesura that, “being inside history, disrupts history and opens another historical possibility or closes down all historical possibilities.”¹⁶ This position, however, still allows both possibilities of change in historical orientation implied by the fact of the Holocaust. In the second part of *Heidegger et 'les juifs,'* which is a response to Lacoue-Labarthe, Lyotard presents the opinion that the Holocaust annuls the future in a specific manner, for nothing new can happen anymore, nothing that could be more current than the Holocaust, nothing that could make the Holocaust a bygone fact inscribed in the existing categories of history. Recently Berel Lang has undertaken a polemic with Lyotard’s position.¹⁷ His argument is that the Holocaust has “hurled us back into history,” abolishing “the utopia of progress with the immoral vision of historical redemption inscribed into it.” The consequence of the Holocaust is the growing awareness that evil of the past never finds its “justification” in any of the possible “happy futures,” which signifies the demise of the philosophy of history and not of history itself. It is no accident that the “post-Holocaust” times are linked to the violent revelations of the “pre-Holocaust” past, as if that past could be revealed only now, after the dismantling of metaphysics, which made possible the metahistorical, safe perception of the horror of history. Emphasizing that this is a bitter fruit of the Holocaust, Lang defends the tendency of contemporary consciousness to “be inside history” from the discourse that transforms the event of the Holocaust into a “metaphysical residue,” a supra-historical Absolute. He believes that the Shoah will not cease to be the mystery of evil and the source of moral obligation if we acknowledge its fundamental historicity. We can confront the “problem of evil” itself only when we cannot escape it any more, from “inside history.” And undoubtedly, one of the forms of such an escape is seeing the Holocaust in “transcendental” terms and the fixation which does not allow to see it as “a part of the history of evil,” without hope for redemption in the future “state of purpose.”

Reflection on the Holocaust in its “transformative” dimension leads to the renewal of the question about the relationship between freedom and necessity in the context of constituting history. If we think more deeply about Milchman’s and Rosenberg’s thesis, it implies a renewed mobilization of the time of history by activating the horizon of the future. The anxiety related to the future dimension of the Holocaust would then signify not an elimination of the historical dimension in postmodernity, a peculiar synchronicity of all wrongs experienced in history (or post-history, as was often claimed in the course of such arguments), but conversely, an open horizon of the future, defined by contemporary anxieties and by the image of a desirable future, an image mediated by the rational project of activity toward such a future. This image of the future will never be stabilized as a logically necessary shape of what is to come, but it will remain an ethi-

¹⁶ A. Milchman and A. Rosenberg, *Eksperimenty...*, 12.

¹⁷ B. Lang, “The Post-Holocaust vs. Postmodern. Evil Inside and Outside History,” in: *Holocaust Representation. Art within the Limits of History and Ethics*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London, 2000.

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cally necessary shape of the future we are obliged to act toward. The future proceeds here from a new, Adornian categorical imperative, an imperative that establishes an intention of acting directed toward the future, after all illusion of progress has ceased, both in its Marxist and liberal versions.

Such renewal of the historical dimension in postmodernity (provided that, together with Lacan and Lacoue-Labarthe, we consider the Holocaust the end of modernity) is defined by a paradox related to the surprising repetition (rather than negation) of the basic tenets of the Enlightenment. The ultimate discrediting of the Enlightenment philosophy of history by the appearance of the genocidal *universum*, and the undermining of the idea of immanent teleology of history expressed in the law of historical progress, unexpectedly revealed the inherent characteristic of the Enlightenment as the intentional political project. The Kantian notion of moral progress, to be realized in universal ethics and international law based on this ethic, has proven to be relevant insofar as it is based on willing participation of free, ethically obliged subjects, not determined by historical necessity, mind's cunning, and teleology of Nature.¹⁸ Hanna Arendt was aware of this when she claimed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that “[i]f there is any sense in the eighteenth century formula that man has come of age, it is that from now on *man is the only possible creator of his own laws and the only possible maker of his own history*”¹⁹ [emphasis mine, TM]. This is a task, however, that no one has undertaken yet, and that “terrifies with its magnitude.” For the Enlightenment did not fulfill its promises, assuming wrongly that the necessity for moral and political progress can be derived from the idea of human nature. Yet no one could expect at the time that the “post-Auschwitz” knowledge about human beings and their nature will arouse “serious doubts about the existence of natural laws”; in effect, human beings are “no longer the measure [of human laws] despite what the new humanists would have us believe,”²⁰ and political order requires an entirely new basis that can be provided only by free, sovereign legislation based on new ethics, a type of a new foundational act. As Arendt observes, only the greatest tragedy could have forced us to undertake such a challenge.

How great our calamity actually is can be gauged from the fact that to achieve even so simple a task as the prevention of murder, we are forced to doubt the unchallenged existence of the basic tenets of morality upon which the whole structure of our life rests and which none of the great revolutionaries, from Robespierre to Lenin, ever seriously questioned. We can no longer believe with Lenin that “people will gradually become accustomed to the observance of the elementary rules of social life that have been...repeated for thousands of years” (*State and Revolution*) and we must therefore try for what Burke’s great common sense deemed impossible: “new discoveries...in morality...or in the ideas of liberty” (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*).²¹

¹⁸ Cf. Hanna Arendt, *Kant’s Political Philosophy* (notes), Courses University of Chicago, seminar 1970, *The Hanna Arendt Papers*, Library of Congress, call number 032255.

¹⁹ H. Arendt, “Concluding Remarks...,” 437.

²⁰ Ibid., 435 and 436.

²¹ Ibid., 438.

It is worth pointing out that the above idea has been entirely ignored by the authors of the *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holokauście* in their account of Hanna Arendt's thought.²² And yet a consideration of this line of thinking could have reinforced their argument at points which are crucial for them. For what has already been said implies that Arendt considers the Holocaust to be a special event, isolated in history, that makes people aware of the course of history and its potentially dangerous direction. Arendt thus understands the Holocaust as a Kantian *signum remmemorativum, demonstrativum et prognosticum*,²³ although she does not define it as the absolute historical exception.²⁴ The "post-Auschwitz" situation means above all the necessity for the new beginning of human history in the sense of the new beginning of political order.

Only a consciously planned beginning of history, only a consciously devised new polity, will eventually be able to reintegrate those who in ever-increasing numbers are being expelled from humanity and severed from human condition... The concept of human rights can again be meaningful only if they are redefined as a right to the human condition itself, which depends upon belonging to some human community... [These rights] can be implemented only if they become the prepolitical foundation of a new polity, the prelegal basis of a new legal structure, the, so to speak, prehistorical fundament from which the history of mankind will derive its essential meaning in much the same way Western civilization did from its own fundamental origin myths.²⁵

There are twofold consequences of making human rights, the rights which humans proclaim themselves and which do not have any transcendent guarantees, into the pre-political basis of the new political order.

Firstly, the foundation of human rights implies the restriction of the sovereign right of the nation states and, in consequence, the right of the international community to intervene if genocide is suspected.²⁶ The current situation after Auschwitz signifies,

[t]he emergence of mankind as *one* political entity, [and] makes the new concept of "crimes against humanity," expressed by Justice Jackson at the Nuremberg Trials, the first and most important notion of international law. It should be recognized, however, that with this notion international law...enters the sphere of a law that is above the [sovereign] nations...Russian concentration camp, on the other hand, in which many millions are deprived of even the doubtful benefits of the law of their own country, could and should become the subject of action that would have to respect the rights and rules of sovereignty.²⁷

²² A. Milchman and A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty...*, pp. 174-195.

²³ Cf. I. Kant, *The Contest of Faculties*, Cambridge UP, 1970.

²⁴ From the start Arendt considers Gulag and Auschwitz to be comparable phenomena.

²⁵ H. Arendt, "Concluding Remarks," 439.

²⁶ Sh. Weiss, *Holokaust i nowy ład międzynarodowy*, paper delivered at the conference *Pamięć Shoah, współczesne reprezentacje*, Łódź, May 2003 (typescript).

²⁷ H. Arendt, "Concluding Remarks," 436-7; cf. J. Habermas, "Dispute on the Past and Future of International Law," 2003.

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Secondly, thinking through the Gulag and the Holocaust – that, in Arendt's thought, leads to the suspension of the problem of absolute exceptionality of the Holocaust, implying a universalization – is not in itself a sufficiently effective means to establish the new law. It is, however, undoubtedly, “a way toward the new form of universal solidarity.”

Because those who were expelled from humanity and from human history, and thereby deprived of their human condition, need the solidarity of all men to assure them of their rightful place in “man's enduring chronicle.”²⁸

Thus the conclusion of these considerations brings us back again to the problem of the new ethic as an expression of the new political beginning of human history. It is an ethic of universal solidarity of the living, based on the anamnetic solidarity with all those who were murdered. By opening the horizon of the future, this ethic actuates history again.

Translation: Krystyna Mazur