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Differences that make a difference

»The goal of historical knowledge is to domesticate disbelief, to explain it away. In this book I wish to offer a thorough historical study of the extermination of the Jews in Europe, without eliminating or domesticating that initial sense of disbelief.«¹ Much praise has been conferred on Saul Friedländer's seminal synthesis of the Holocaust from the perspective of the experience of its victims – and rightly so. *The Years of Extermination* is a truly narrative and transnational *Erfahrungsgeschichte* of the Holocaust – and I don't know any other book that familiarizes its readers in such detail with its unimaginable character and horrors. Mainly in *Years of Extermination's* interpretative paragraphs Friedländer is also making causal, explanatory claims about the efficacy of specific factors in the Holocaust when taking positions in the historiographical debate. Obviously, however, *The Years of Extermination* is not constructed as a comparative, explanatory history of the Holocaust – but in my comment I want to pinpoint some differences between narrative and explanatory approaches, because *Years of Extermination's* brilliance notwithstanding, its lack of comparison and its exclusive narrative focus on the experience of the victims in my view comes at an »epistemological cost«. This »epistemological cost« has also been indicated by Wulf Kansteiner in his opening speech when he questioned the explanatory role of Hitler's »redemptive anti-Semitism« as »the prime mover«² of the extermination policies of Nazi-Germany. Given Friedländer's self reflexive sophistication I assume that he is intentionally paying this »price« for retaining »the sense of disbelief«. My comment will consist of two parts: the first part will deal with two methodological questions and the second part will deal with an ethical question.

Factors, explanation and methodology

The *first* methodological problem I want to raise here is that the explanatory weight of *any* factor – including anti-Semitism in the Holocaust – can only be assessed and validated empirically through systematic comparisons of the similarities and the differences in a set of relevant cases – for example in Germany, in the Netherlands and in Belgium. Moreover, since we are always dealing with multiple explanatory factors, their weight is always relative to each other and is connected to particular contexts. For these reasons explanatory weight is *not* a matter of »postulates«, as Friedländer suggests³.

The *second* methodological problem I want to highlight is that Friedländer himself is providing data (scattered around in his very data-rich book) that contradict his thesis that anti-Semitism all over Europe was ›the prime mover‹ and thus the single most important factor explaining the Nazi extermination policies. Since Friedländer is writing about the role of ›factors‹⁴ and since he is presenting – counterfactual – causal claims (statements of the ›if not x, then not y‹-form), I think it is legitimate to address these two problems here⁵.

To exemplify the first methodological problem we can take a look at the cases of the Netherlands and of Belgium. In the Netherlands 75 percent of the Jewish population was exterminated and in Belgium ›only‹ 40 percent in the same period – that is approximately half of the Dutch percentage. Traditional anti-Semitism in both the Dutch and in the Belgian case was relatively moderate, so this similarity does not explain the remarkable difference in the extermination rates.

When we compare the French case to the Dutch and the Belgian ones the explanatory problem only gets bigger: while in France traditional anti-Semitism was relatively strong, the extermination rate of the French Jews was ›only‹ 25 percent, that is one third of the Dutch percentage and 60 percent of the Belgian one. Of course Friedländer knows these data

better than anybody else, nevertheless – and this is my methodological point – he has not integrated them in *Years of Extermination's* argument⁶.

The Dutch and Belgian cases also cast doubt on the independent explanatory weight of another factor that is often used in narratives about the Holocaust in general and differences in the national rates of extermination in particular, that is: the rate of assimilation alias the rate of social integration of the Jews in their (national) surroundings. Friedländer does so too when he explicitly mentions (with Mazower) the lack of assimilation of the Jews of Thessaloniki as an explanatory factor for their quick and relatively ›smooth‹ deportation to Auschwitz in March 1943⁷. However, of the Jews in the Netherlands almost 70 percent were born there or had been naturalized. In Belgium, only 6 percent of the Jews were borne there or had been naturalized. So the comparison of Belgium and the Netherlands suggests that if the rate of assimilation of the Jews is an explanatory variable for their rate of extermination, then in these two cases there is a *negative* correlation between the two instead of a positive one. Of course, Friedländer also underlines the importance of other factors than anti-Semitism, like the collaboration of the police with the Nazi's and the presence of a resistance movement as ›differences that make a difference‹ – for instance in the Dutch, the Belgian, the French and the Greek cases. However, he does not connect these particular cases to his general thesis of Hitler's ›redemptive anti-Semitism‹ as the ›prime mover‹ of the Holocaust.⁸

This leads me to my second – related – methodological problem, that is the fact that Friedländer himself is mentioning factors and facts in *The Years of Extermination* that run counter to his ›prime mover‹ thesis. Take for instance what Friedländer himself states about the ›essential‹ role of pure greed as a motivation for the Holocaust: »Throughout the twelve years of the Third Reich, looting of Jewish property was the essence«⁹. From an empirical point of view greed

may have a better empirical support as an explanatory factor than ›redemptive anti-Semitism‹ because *everywhere* Jews have been murdered in Europe, they had been robbed systematically before (and even after) – while their murderers have *not* all been known for their ›redemptive anti-Semitic‹ convictions, as Browning and Welzer both have argued beyond reasonable doubt¹⁰. The fact that the Nazi's were prepared to trade Jews for foreign currency till the very end of the war also seems to support the primacy of the ›economic‹ motive¹¹.

Basically Friedländer himself comes close to relativizing his own central argument concerning the primary role of German ›redemptive anti-Semitism‹ explicitly when he mentions that members of other nationalities than Germans – like Italians, Rumanians, Poles and Hungarians – sometimes ›outperformed‹ the Nazi-Germans in the brutality of murdering Jews¹². Neither does Friedländer hide the fact that Jews themselves could have anti-Semitic prejudices, nor the fact that some Jews even participated as perpetrators in the Holocaust¹³. Last but not least, Friedländer remains ambiguous as to the role that anti-Semitism played in the bureaucratic organization of the Holocaust¹⁴. All these facts suggest that for an explanation of the Holocaust a systematic comparison of how its victims experienced their catastrophic fates is necessary, but not sufficient. We also need systematic, comparative knowledge about the perpetrators and about the bystanders of the Holocaust, because only the combination of these three perspectives will allow us to explain the bewildering local varieties of the Holocaust – their depressing similarities notwithstanding. Precisely because the Holocaust was *not* an exclusively Nazi-German project, explanations exclusively focusing on Nazi-Germany and centered on Hitler's redemptive anti-Semitism, do not suffice¹⁵. We need, as Friedländer emphasizes himself, studies of the ›interaction‹ of *all* forces in play at ›the micro-level‹¹⁶. This certainly includes a comparative, explanatory *Täterforschung* – in line with Brown-

ing and Welzer – and an abandonment of the idea that the Holocaust represents a ›black hole‹ in historical understanding, as Dan Diner once phrased it¹⁷: an idea that appears connected to the problematic notion that the Holocaust is ›unrepresentable‹ (analyzed in this volume by Daniel Fulda).

The Ethics of Narrative

My second question concerns the ethical or normative aspects of Friedländers line of argument. I agree with Hayden White that *all* narratives – historical and fictional – carry some ethical contents in as far as they address our existential issues – especially our catastrophes. And *The Years of Extermination* does that brilliantly, no doubt, which contributes to its status as a ›historiographical monument‹. Therefore my question in case is *not* a critique of *Years of Extermination*, although I understand Friedländer worries about ›ethics‹ since Martin Broszat's suggestions concerning the ›mythical‹ aspects of Jewish history writing. My question only concerns the structure of *Years of Extermination's* normative arguments.

Like many other historical narratives, *The Years of Extermination* frames its ethical questions primarily in a *negative mode* that is in its reconstruction of what did *not* happen – embedded in a reconstruction of what did happen, of course¹⁸. The explicit normative argument is formulated in *Years of Extermination's* Introduction. There Friedländer states that the »ideological fervor« of »redemptive anti-Semitism« is essential for his line of analysis because »Its significance derives from one essential fact«: »Not one social group, not one religious community, not one scholarly institution or professional association in Germany and throughout Europe declared its solidarity with the Jews [...]. To the contrary, many social constituencies, many power groups were directly involved in the expropriation of the Jews and eager, be it out of greed, for their wholesale disappearance«¹⁹. Indirectly

Friedländer is arguing that all these groups could and should have acted differently than they actually did²⁰.

As a consequence of this ›negative‹ line of reasoning Friedländer throughout *The Years of Extermination* is focusing on *Unterlassungshandeln* that is on essential things left undone resulting in ›silences‹ and in ›absences‹ – things that did *not* happen. The churches, nor the pope, nor the populations in general, nor the Allies undertook any specific actions to save the Jews, and neither did the Jews in the UK and in the US nor in Palestine – although all were well informed about the ongoing extermination. This is also retrospectively as shocking as true²¹. Remarkably, however, this writing of history in the negative mode of Friedländer's history of the Holocaust shows a structural similarity with the histories of Germany written by the *Sonderweg*-historians of the Bielefeld School, who tried to explain the Third Reich and the Holocaust by pointing at things the *Germans* in the past did *not* do – like staging a successful bourgeois revolution in 1848 and like producing a sound parliamentary-democratic political culture before 1945²². I wonder whether Friedländer was aware of this similarity between his narrative strategy and that of the Bielefeld School in thematizing normative relevant ›absences‹ and *Werthorizonte vis a vis* the Holocaust.

_1 Friedländer (2007d), p. xxvi. _2 Ebenda, p. xvii: »In this volume, as in *The Years of Persecution*, I have chosen to focus on the centrality of ideological-cultural factors as the prime movers in regard to the Jewish issue, depending of course on circumstances, institutional dynamics, and essentially, for the period dealt with here, on the evolution of the war«. Compare Diner (1997), p. 313: »For Jews, anti-Semitism justly stands at the forefront of every historical reconstruction or explanation of the Holocaust, given the lack of any other convincing motive.« _3 Friedländer (2007d), p. xvii; see for compar-

ative causal explanation Lorenz (1997), p. 231-285. _4 Friedländer (2007d), p. xvi: »The historian faces the interaction of very diverse long- or short-term factors that can each be defined and interpreted; there very convergence, however, eludes an overall analytic category«. _5 Ebenda, p. xvii: »Yet, without the obsessive anti-Semitism and the personal impact of Adolf Hitler, first in the framework of his movement, then on the national scene after January 1933, the widespread German anti-Semitism of those years would probably not have coalesced into anti-Jewish political action and certainly not into its sequels«. Also see ebenda, p. 658: »National Socialism could not have arisen and taken hold without Adolf Hitler on the one hand, and without the Germans response to Hitler on the other«. _6 See Griffioen/Zeller (2011). _7 Friedländer (2007d), p. 488. _8 Ebenda, pp. 422 f. for Belgium and the Netherlands. _9 ebenda, p. 497, p. 535 where Friedländer describes the attitudes of the Polish and Ukrainian peasants towards the Jews as »traditional hatred, isolated instances of courage, and *mostly, almost everywhere*, the insatiable greed for money or other spoils«. Ebenda, p. 478 f. He states that »Germans and other Europeans continued tacitly to support the extermination campaign, *both for profit and on ideological grounds*«. Also ebenda, p. 577, where he writes that »to a degree, all these motivations probably played some role, *wherever mere greed was not the sole overriding factor*«. Authors like Götz Aly and Jan Gross also have emphasized greed as the essential motive behind the killing. _10 Browning (1992b); Welzer (2005). _11 Friedländer (2007d), p. 450, p. 583, p. 594. _12 Ebenda, p. 372, p. 375, p. 612, p. 614, p. 641. _13 Ebenda, p. 509: »It was by no means unusual for one Jew to use arguments against another Jew that were not very different from those of the anti-Semites«; and ebenda, p. 436 f., where he refers to the Vilna Jewish police assisting the Germans in shooting local Jews in October 1942. Also see Friedländer on the collaboration of the Jewish »Kapo's« on p. 509. Cf. Rigg (2004), who estimates that some 140°000 Germans of partial-Jewish decent did service in the *Wehrmacht*. _14 Compare Friedländer (2007d), p. 478 f.: »In order to be effective, however, the ideological impetus had to emanate not only from the top but also be fanatically adopted and enforced at intermediate levels of the system by the technocrats, organizers, and direct implementers of the extermination – by those, in short, who made the system work, several levels below the main political leadership«, with his Friedländer (2007c), p. 45: »Die Bürokratie spielte die zentrale Rolle, eine Bürokratie, die die Vernichtung gleichgültig gegenüberstand, aber von einem Führer gelenkt wurde, der seinerseits von den stärksten Überzeugungen getrieben wurde«. _15 Gross/Jan (2001) argued just that for the Polish case. Also see Müller/Rolf-Dieter (2007). As Müller observes one fourth of the military on

the German side of the Eastern front was not German but foreign. Also see Ian Kershaw's recent critical balance of the notion of *Volksgemeinschaft* as the explanation of the Holocaust, Kershaw (2011). _16 Friedländer (2007d), p. xxiv. _17 Diner (1987), p. 186: »Über den Judenmord hinaus war Auschwitz praktische Widerlegung westlicher Zivilisation [...]. Solche Handlung ist dem von säkularen Denkformen bestimmten Verstand nicht zu integrieren [...]. Ein Begreifen von Auschwitz angesichts Auschwitz' sei mit dem Versuch vergleichbar, offenen Auges in die Sonne zu starren.« _18 See for other examples Lorenz (2010). _19 Friedländer (2007d), p. xxi. _20 Elsewhere Friedländer has formulated this ›moral‹ argument explicitly. See Friedländer (2007e), p. 45, on Fassungslosigkeit and Lähmung of historians vis a vis the Holocaust: »Wir wissen im einzelnen, was geschah; wir kennen die Abfolge der Ereignisse und ihre möglichen Zusammenhänge; aber die Tiefendynamik des Phänomens entgleitet uns. Und was wir auch nicht begreifen, ist die fast schlagartige Auflösung der politischen, institutionellen und der Rechtsstrukturen Deutschlands sowie die Kapitulation der moralischen Kräfte, die naturgemäß wichtige Hindernisse hätten darstellen müssen für die Nazis in Deutschland, in anderen europäischen Ländern und in der gesamten westlichen Welt.« _21 Friedländer devotes extended space to the consistent silence of the pope and of the Catholic Church on the murder of the Jews. Nevertheless, the fact that ›only‹ 20 percent of the Italian Jews were exterminated in Catholic Italy casts doubt on the independent explanatory weight of this factor. Friedländer (2007d), p. 561. _22 See especially Blackbourn/Eley (1992).