



Karyn Ball. *Disciplining the Holocaust*. Insinuations: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Literature. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. xiii + 320 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-7541-6.

Reviewed by Joanne Sayner (Department of German Studies, University of Birmingham)

Published on H-German (October, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

“Mastery over the Affects” and the Dangers of Critical Reflection

Disciplining the Holocaust is ... an attempt to fathom how our earnest and high-minded scholarship about traumatic history already stoops into cruel obtuseness, an inner coldness that [Theodor] Adorno derided as ‘the basic principle of subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz’” (p. 18). As this quotation from Karyn Ball’s introduction reveals, this is an intentionally provocative text. It is a detailed, wide-ranging study of the complex interrelations within intellectual history dealing with the Holocaust. Drawing on a huge range of philosophical, psychoanalytical, and critical theory texts, this volume investigates the ways in which “speaking properly” about the Holocaust is socially policed. Using Michel Foucault’s principle of discipline, Ball presents what she sees as a disciplinary code existing in relation to the production and reception of texts about the Holocaust. She combines this claim with insights from psychoanalysis, particularly work by Judith Butler, in order to stress the importance of the unconscious and imaginary as part of a demand for “critical reflection” in scholars’ attempts to control the moral significance of the past for different groups in the present. She highlights how attempts to defend an “appropriate (rigorous and ethical)” (p. 8) response to the Holocaust are embroiled in issues of class, ethnicity, and gender. The book is divided into an introduction and five chapters, with a complex interweaving of the ideas throughout. The introduction provides a useful and concise overview of what is to follow and given the absence of a concluding chapter, the reader will benefit from re-reading it.

In the first chapter, Ball revisits the much commented-on Daniel Goldhagen debate. She takes a fascinating look at the ways in which an emphasis on “appropriate restraint” in historiography of the Holocaust has become a norm of expertise. While recognizing the “weak logic” (p. 8) of Goldhagen’s work, she reflects on the “antidisciplinary” (p. 20) nature of his

rage as the son of a Jewish Holocaust survivor. She argues that criticism of his “pornographic” narrative style was based both on assumptions of taste (and therefore class) and also assumptions about the role fantasy should play in historical texts. Ball points out that much of the condemnation of Goldhagen was based on a supposedly self-evident, “correct” way of portraying events. Via this insight, she links not only the content of his book but also its narrative style to institutionalized understandings of the Holocaust. Through comparison with Christopher Browning’s more moderate style, she asks: “Do these ‘ordinary men’ really deserve the courtesy that Browning extends to them by mitigating their agency through his recourse to the passive voice?” (p. 29). She reiterates that the advantage of Goldhagen’s approach, notwithstanding its many limitations, is that it kept antisemitism at the forefront of the analysis. Ultimately, the aim of this first chapter is to “question how historiography reinscribes its limits as a mode of professional subject formation by discouraging historians from querying their methods for assessing the imaginative and affective dimensions of representation” (p. 34). For Ball, this question is quite clearly one of pedagogy and she argues that it is necessary to “provoke more sensitivity about the social and aesthetic dimensions of the ideal of scientific rigor that enhance its power to decide the membership and conduct of the professional Elect” (p. 42). She ultimately insists that it is “incumbent upon us to reassess the value of ... professional protocol if it reproves rage against mass murder as bad behavior” (p. 43). She questions: “Does such discipline not imitate the domestication of emotion in the workplace that facilitated the administration of genocidal policies on every level of German society?” (p. 43). She ends this chapter by asserting unequivocally that historians need to divest “themselves of a scientific equanimity that is barbaric in the face of genocide” (p. 44). The chapter treads a fine line between recognizing

the problems with Goldhagen's book and insisting on the significance of his approach in relation to his positionality. The debate is usefully set within the context of postmodern approaches to the Holocaust.

In the second chapter, on the Peter Eisenman Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Ball argues that an "image prohibition aesthetics" (p. 48) was a disciplining factor in the debates about the memorial. She takes issue with claims about the supposed unrepresentability of the Holocaust by exposing the "intellectual lineages and cultural sedimentations" (p. 11) of this discourse. The chapter begins by setting questions of memorialization within the context of broader memory politics in West Germany during the 1980s, particularly the Historians' Debate and the controversy over Ronald Reagan's visit to Bitburg, but also the successive reincarnations of the Neue Wache. Through a detailed analysis of discussions since the 1980s about normalization and German national identity, Ball draws continuities through the work of Adorno to Jürgen Habermas and maintains that "Habermas's adaptation of Adorno's ideal of critical remembrance reinforces the hegemonic privilege of a West German standpoint that carries over into memorial debates" (p. 57). Insisting that the discussions about Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum preempted and informed many of the debates about the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, she claims that through an emphasis on a "negative memorial genre ... moral protocols have bled into aesthetic conventions" (p. 13). Ball suggests that deconstruction has been naturalized as "*the* genre of Holocaust memorialization par excellence" (p. 78) and that Holocaust memorials are now regulated by the "protocols of the antimemorial genre" (p. 79). Ball ultimately finds this development to be problematic because "it makes trauma into the occasion for an aesthetic experience that is only possible from a contemplative distance that would not be available for the actual victims of violence and persecution" (p. 92).

In the third chapter, "'Auschwitz' after Lyotard," Ball's aim is to "demonstrate that the prevailing wisdom about the 'insurmountability' and 'irreconcilability' of the 'caesura' of Auschwitz is not inevitable, but is rather the sedimentation of the intellectual lineages that articulate and instill postmetaphysical values" (p. 92). She begins by tracing Jean-François Lyotard's engagement with the negative critical aesthetic found in Adorno's writings in order to "open up Lyotard's densely intertextual configuration of 'Auschwitz' as a negative philosophical and historical sign" (p. 98). She argues that postmodernist philosophy is disciplined by an understanding of "Auschwitz" as "sublime proof of an irreparably damaged moral consensus" (p. 99). The chapter is framed

by an analysis of the ways in which Holocaust scholars are compelled to make "disciplinary moves" (p. 126) in order to refute Holocaust deniers. Through an incredibly detailed confrontation with a myriad of theoretical texts, Ball highlights the ways in which debates about experience, testimony, and conceptions of the self within postmodern discourse can in fact undermine empathy with victims of the Holocaust.

In the fourth chapter, Ball examines "the conditions and limits of the psychoanalytic framework for evaluating traumatic affect in discourse about the Holocaust" (p. 15). She is particularly concerned with the role that the unconscious plays in working through the past and she re-reads Sigmund Freud in order to highlight "how critical reflection is unconsciously organized" (p. 15). Here, Ball draws on a wide range of well-established work on trauma theory in order to problematize an emphasis on the "conscious aims of remembrance and mourning" which, she argues, "disciplines psychoanalysis by suppressing the agency of the unconscious" (p. 151). Through an examination of work by Dominic LaCapra, Jean Laplanche, and Butler, among others, Ball criticizes the "overemphasis on free will which comes to the fore whenever scholars equate working through with critical reflection" (p. 152). This focus, she maintains, can lead to a hierarchy of trauma (p. 177) and to a marginalization of the fascination that violence exerts.

In the final chapter, issues of testimony and confession provide the basis for Ball's discussion of fantasy and desire within a "disciplinary imaginary shaped by the legacies of Foucault, deconstruction, psychoanalysis and identity politics" (p. 17). Ball takes as her starting point a feminist conference on the Holocaust at which survivors testified, some of them for the first time, about gendered forms of violence and humiliation. An interrogation of her own role as feminist critic listening to these testimonies prompts a discussion of voyeurism in relation to the Holocaust and the problematics of a contemporary culture of confession. The ethical dimensions of witnessing such testimony/confession and the repeated tendency to return to this subject matter lead Ball to her final provocation: "I have breached my own deeply held sense of propriety in the hope that the import of my analysis will not be limited to a pedestrian increase in self-awareness, but will instead motivate scholars to take responsibility for the fantasies and foreclosures that propel our compulsive repetitions. The commitment to refine our analytical tools cannot be entirely separated from a scientific gaze that objectifies in order to penetrate its object; nor can it be extricated from the narcissistic and erotic dimensions of fantasy that we might oth-

erwise foreclose in the spirit of a crusade of moral legitimacy. To recognize this blindspot in the scholar's speculum is to begin to assume responsibility for the unconscious aspects of our fascination with the Holocaust—to break down unacknowledged obsessions, end a cycle of ritualized scandals, and thereby discover a different way of counting ourselves among the accountable, to become more accountable still. At stake is the future of a critical approach that could allow for a genuine departure from these vicious circles of righteous self-selection” (p. 218).

Disciplining the Holocaust is an ambitious and thought-provoking study that touches on many uncomfortable questions for scholars in this area. It will un-

doubtedly prompt discussion and debate. The scope of theoretical texts covered would make this extremely challenging reading for undergraduates, and indeed postgraduates, but the chapters on Goldhagen and the Eisenman memorial may provide more concrete points of departure for provocative teaching discussion. The breadth of these case studies is certainly a strength of the text, as is the impressive scope of critical engagement. An extensive sixty-six pages of notes accompanying the text provide an invaluable wealth of references on canonical and less well-known texts, although given the detail of these, it would have been useful to have a separate bibliography as well. The similarly extensive index is vital for negotiating the complex web of references.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Joanne Sayner. Review of Ball, Karyn, *Disciplining the Holocaust*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25290>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.