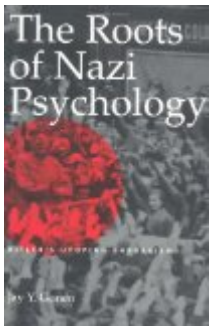
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jay Y. Gonen. *The Roots of Nazi Psychology: Hitler's Utopian Barbarism.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000. 224 pp. $25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-9046-4.



Reviewed by Nitzan Lebovic

Published on H-German (June, 2004)

The concept of barbarism, a precious asset for the sweeping theses spun out in Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* and post-September 11 editorials, is once again popular. For Jay Gonen, author of *The Roots of Nazi Psychology*, the twentieth-century's most infamous brand of barbarism arose out of a destabilized ethics and dangerously "diffused boundaries." His subtitle, *Hitler's Utopian Barbarism*, suggests that his may be the perfect case study for those in Washington and London convinced that they are all that stands between the frail blossom of civilization and the icy breath of barbarism.

Gonen's book belongs to two young intellectual traditions, both of which grew out of modernism. The first is the social psychology of modern mass culture, which was born with Gustav Le Bon's *Psychology of the Crowd* (1895) and sharpened in a study Sigmund Freud published in 1921, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Wilhelm Reich's *Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) focused on the specific symbols of a particular form of German fascism; his study was part of a long and courageous effort by the Frankfurt School to analyze mass culture and protest its manipulation by Germany's conservatives and radical right wing. The other tradition to which the book belongs is the historiography of the intellectual roots of Nazism, which has analyzed the Nazis' innovative use of language and propaganda to win the hearts and minds of the crowd. Taking after Ebhard Jaeckel, Rudolf Binion, George Mosse and others, Gonen shows that Hitler was acquainted with Le Bon's theory as well as with writings that mentioned and responded to Freud's theory (pp. 13, 92). This postulated link between the roots of social psychology and the Fuehrer permits a reconsideration of the psychology of Hitler's speeches and their psychic appeal.

The subject of Gonen's book is not the hearts and minds of perpetrators and victims, but "ideology," an abstract construct that has, according to Gonen, its own "soul." Since, as Gonen writes, "Nazi success in mobilizing the masses was not due merely to the deliberate use of fear and terror but primarily to the Nazi ideological messages that fell right on the target," his subject is "ideology and its underlying psychological loadings" (pp.

1, 12). Like Karl Mannheim, Gonen pledges allegiance to "the unmasking of those unconscious motives which bind the group existence" (p. 1). He never considers the group as a set of individuals: for him the consciousness--and the unconscious--of the German people under Nazism can be traced to the pathologies of one man, the leader and, to use a Freudian term, the "ideal father." Ideology does have a face after all.

Gonen never mentions Hobbes or Cicero, or any other political philosopher for that matter, but the schema he develops to analyze Nazi ideology corresponds to Hobbes' division of the self into three persons: the self, the adversary, and the self-judge (***mei, adversarii et judicis***). In psychoanalytical terms this would be the Ego, the Id (or the other) and the Superego. Barbarism, in this company, is only waiting to take over. Its ***prosopon*** (face) takes the form of a deceitful ***persona*** (disguise).

Gonen contends that Nazism possessed "'bad' ego quality" which it projected onto the Jews, its "other." The barbarism of which the Jews were accused was a pure evil: this premise is fundamental to the ideology Gonen labels "utopian barbarism." To explain this construction, he theorizes a "primordial split [that] develops into a breached self that utilizes projections," a trauma that afflicted the German collectivity, confusing and weakening it. The projection of evil onto the Jews "create[d] a collective division of 'us' and 'them'" (p. 207). Political psycho-philosophy has never looked simpler.

The book's purpose is explicitly therapeutic. Gonen speaks of recovering, exposing and healing the trauma of the Nazi ideological psyche, and the possibility that barbaric anti-Semitism might reappear in a twenty-first-century clash of civilizations haunts its pages. A study of Nazi psychology, the author proposes, may illuminate the more general group experiences of good and evil, "us" and "them," civilized and barbarian. Yet, the Nazis believed that the recovery of the German people depended on a simple cure: the correct identification of the barbarians. The logical implication is that the reader is asked to identify the true barbarians, in contrast to false ones, a very dangerous move in rhetorical terms. Referring to a collection of damning documents entitled ***Hitler's Secret Conversations*** (1953), Gonen writes: "Trevor-Roper was right in underscoring the [Nazi] identification with barbarians. This identification was a natural for a racially colored self-image." Gonen's relief is evident: the true other had been identified, the historical barbarian.

To mobilize mass psychology, Gonen shows in the book, ideology was the key or the ***Zeitgeist*** behind it. But what does he take these to be? "Ideology," Gonen explains, "is any idea or set of ideas that provides a prescriptive view of life" (p. 2). But ideology itself is controlled, he claims, by the abstract notion of the ***Zeitgeist***, not some highly concrete agent. Defining it through its own semantic value, Gonen writes, "the Zeitgeist is a concept that denotes the ripening of a cultural image or idea to the point where its time has arrived" (p. 3). What stands behind the ***Zeitgeist***? "This elusive gamesmanship," he explains, "is being conducted under a psychohistorical law of supply and demand" (p. 5). Hitler is, then, nothing else than the "expert scanner of the Zeitgeist" (p. 5). Is a ***Zeitgeist*** really "prescriptive"? Is an ideology only a set of ideas? Does this "set of ideas" necessarily relate to a "view of life"? These are only some of the methodological problems that bedevil this book from its beginning.

Because Gonen relies heavily on English translations made in the 1940s (in which inaccuracies abound) and on the often, very emotional historiography of the 1950s and 1960s, the beginning point for his reflections already dictates the conclusion. As a result, the "psychology" of the book's title does not extend beyond a very general differentiation of conscious and unconscious, body and intellect. As if it were sufficient simply to nod in the general direction of interpretation,

Gonen notes, "it is interesting to observe that the images used to describe the splitting impact of the internationalist enemies [namely, Jews and Marxists] are taken from the human body," without suggesting why (p. 23).

In Gonen's study Hitler's personality is presented in the same terms Hitler reserved for his own "others": pathological, deceiving, obsessed with a "redemptive anti-Semitism." Though the last phrase is a reference to Saul Friedlaender's recent *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, Gonen misses Friedlaender's emphasis on the gradual radicalization of anti-Semitism (p. 22). Gonen's view is that the "primordial split" began with the "fuzzy boundaries" of medieval myths and the Holly Roman Empire, and ended with the Holocaust. This fission was due to "a link between aggressive orality and the fuzzy boundaries of a primitive psychological state" (p. 123). Gonen admits of no change in Nazi ideology between 1922 and 1945. Unlike Ian Kershaw's recent biography, which depicts Hitler as one element in a system "working towards the Fuehrer," *The Roots of Nazi Psychology* does not address this "system," only its most prominent representatives, Hitler and Goebbels. The main argument is that Hitler "was too consistent about these issues [i.e., anti-Semitism and its psychological underpinnings] throughout his political lifetime for them to be dismissed as mere rhetoric" (p. 37). He never explains who regards those as "mere rhetoric," though. The absence of change and of chronology, combined with an underdeveloped theoretical scheme, make Nazi Germany seem like an utterly stagnant period. The book's thematic division into "The Jewish Danger," "The Leadership Principle," "The Expansion of the Living Space," "The Folkish Psychology" and so on, strengthens that feeling of repetition without change.

There is no historical event that presents a greater challenge to those who would understand it at the human level than the Holocaust. But borrowing the *Lebensraum* of the perpetrator's soul will not help to overcome this challenge. A division of the world into good and bad only encourages the sort of movement that swept to power in 1930s Germany, relying so heavily on overcooked judgments and pre-assumptions only culminates in the consecration of historical anachronisms.

In the end we return to the question that haunts this review, that haunts critical thinkers from both methodological and ethical perspectives. The Alexandrian poet Cavafy summed up this wondering in 1904 with a question: "What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?" Cavafy's last words remind us of the challenge that historians of repressive times must answer:

"night is here but the barbarians have not come. / And some people arrived from the borders, / and said that there are no longer any barbarians. / And now what shall become of us without any barbarians? / Those people were some kind of solution."[1]

Note

[1] Many of Constantine P. Cavafy's (1863-1933) poems are translated and can be found on the web at: http://users.hol.gr/~barbanis/cavafy/barbarians.html. Here, "Waiting for the Barbarians," 1904. See also C.P. Cavafy, Collected Poems, trs. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

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Citation: Nitzan Lebovic. Review of Gonen, Jay Y. *The Roots of Nazi Psychology: Hitler's Utopian Barbarism.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.

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