

**DIGITALCOMMONS**  
—@WAYNESTATE—

**Criticism**

---

Volume 53

Issue 4 *Transcultural Negotiations of Holocaust  
Memory*

Article 9

---

2011

## The Holocaust: An "Engorged" Symbol of Evil?

Brett Ashley Kaplan

*University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*, [bakaplan@illinois.edu](mailto:bakaplan@illinois.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kaplan, Brett Ashley (2011) "The Holocaust: An "Engorged" Symbol of Evil?," *Criticism*: Vol. 53: Iss. 4, Article 9.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol53/iss4/9>

## THE HOLOCAUST: AN “ENGORGED” SYMBOL OF EVIL? Brett Ashley Kaplan

---

*Remembering the Holocaust: A Debate* by Jeffrey C. Alexander, with Martin Jay, Bernhard Giesen, Michael Rothberg, Robert Manne, Nathan Glazer, Elihu Katz, and Ruth Katz. Foreword by Geoffrey Hartman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 224. \$27.95 cloth.

*Remembering the Holocaust* offers a space for debate about how the Holocaust has taken center stage in most discussions about evil in America since the 1960s. The text features a reprint of sociologist Jeffrey Alexander’s widely read essay “The Social Construction of Moral Universals” (2002), followed by several contributions from luminaries in the field of Holocaust studies who agree, disagree, and otherwise engage Alexander’s account. In his essay, Alexander sets out to explain why the Holocaust has come to occupy the “limelight” in much cultural discourse around evil; his project adopts Kant’s “radical evil,” threads it through Émile Durkheim, and comes up with “sacred-evil,” which describes the process of making a tragedy out of the Holocaust. This “traumadrama,” Alexander argues, has become a universal symbol of evil. The instrumentalization of how the Holocaust figures among the many other catastrophic events in global history is ultimately at stake in understanding the event. As Geoffrey Hartman notes in the foreword, “the wound is in danger of becoming the identity” (xiii). As virtually everyone in *Remembering the Holocaust* reiterates, the wound of the Holocaust was used, according to Peter Novick, to bolster Israel. And Alexander, after all the commentators on his essay have offered their views, concludes with a return to how the

Holocaust functions in the Israel–Palestine conflict.

“Social Construction” begins with the question, “How did a specific and situated historical event . . . become transformed into a generalized symbol of human suffering and moral evil, a universalized symbol” (3). It is an apt question now and was also in the late 1990s when he began researching the issue. Alexander answers his question by moving through several examples of how this came to be and concludes that “the trauma-drama gave the story of the Holocaust a mythical status” (34) and that its message can be understood as “evil is inside all of us and in every society” (35). David Grossman’s child-of-survivors narrator, Momik, in *See Under: Love* (2002) terms this the LNIY—the little Nazi in you. In other words, Alexander articulates how the Holocaust became separated from the war and how it took on this mythical status that enabled everyone to recognize the potentiality of evil within. Paired with Novick’s account, the two offer an excellent summary of how the Holocaust took prominence in our cultural imaginary of evil.

While he offers a detailed history of the cultural construction of the Holocaust as a “sacred-evil,” both his tone and his vocabulary can be hard to justify, if not understand. For example, in discussing the United States Holocaust Memorial

Museum’s permanent exhibit, he notes that there are “powerfully negative images of concentration camps” (47), which begs the question of how there might be powerfully positive images of the camps. Even more worrying, while Martin Jay uses the word “odd” to describe Alexander’s repeated use of “engorged” (I counted five iterations within a two-page sample) to describe the discourse around the Holocaust, none of the smart and interesting commentaries delve at length into Alexander’s rhetoric:

An engorged evil overflows with badness. Evil becomes labile and liquid; it drips and seeps, ruining everything it touches. Under the sign of the tragic narrative, the Holocaust did become engorged, and its seepage polluted everything with which it came into contact (50).

I agree with Jay that the word “engorged” is odd, but I would go further and argue that its diverse connotations render it inappropriate in this context. What I found immensely unclear in Alexander’s narrative, and what this example demonstrates, is exactly where he stands in his historicization. Through the tone of these sentences one gets the impression that Alexander almost viscerally reacts to this seeping pollution of the Holocaust—as though this genocide

were itself dirty in both senses of the word and were somehow through its own agency infecting, sullyng, that which it touches. While Alexander argues that this is how the Holocaust is socially constructed, I found throughout the essay that the power of his tone distracted from the content of his argument. These tropes take over and even run the risk of advocating the very things against which "Social Construction" argues because they impute to the event itself a corrupting force rather than locating the source of the corruption in the very social constructions Alexander details.

Each of the response essays begins by summarizing Alexander's argument, which makes a certain amount of sense, and it is somewhat interesting to see how each respondent chooses to narrativize his text, but after the third or fourth essay I wondered whether perhaps the responses could have begun after the narration, especially since "Social Construction" inaugurates the book. Some of the essays touch on the disciplinary differences between sociology and perspectives gleaned from other disciplines, but I think more discussion of these disciplinary questions would have been merited, especially since the responses are gleaned from scholars in sociology, history, communication, musicology, politics, and English. Indeed, the necessarily interdisciplinary nature of Holocaust studies means that this diverse

array of academic fields might itself have been dramatized in the book.

Many of the responses rightly suggest moving the discussion of the cultural construction of the Holocaust beyond the Euro-American context and looking, as much work in global trauma studies has done since Alexander wrote his essay, at the rest of the world. Bernhard Giesen expands the scope of Alexander's essay by offering examples of national cultures that have or have not accepted guilt and responsibility for their respective national crimes. Germany moved from "demonizing the origin of evil" (116) to a nation epitomized in Willy Brandt's kneeling before a monument in honor of the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, that accepted responsibility and collective guilt to such a degree that the Holocaust became its "unwritten constitution" (117). Giesen conducts an instructive comparison between the "readiness of the German public to accept the Holocaust legacy" (119) and the steadfast refusals by Turkey and Japan to accept their respective legacies of violence. Giesen's essay, along with Martin Jay's and Michael Rothberg's contributions, provide an important global expansion to Alexander's more local perspective.

Drawn from his brilliant, transformative study, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009), Michael Rothberg's response offers a

corrective to Alexander's focus on the United States and suggests "the need to disarticulate notions of universalism from Americanization and bring to view the heterogeneity of exchanges between memory of the Holocaust and memory of other histories of trauma and extreme violence" (125). As Rothberg's project argues throughout, a rich interchange of ideas among diverse national traumas occurred; this interchange may not be as visible in the American setting but, as Rothberg concludes, "far from being a floating, universal signifier, the Holocaust emerges in its specificity as part of a multidirectional network of diverse histories of extreme violence, torture, and racist policy" (132). In conversation with Rothberg, several scholars have similarly compared the Holocaust to other genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Armenia, and Darfur, as well as noting commonalities and divergences among international traumas such as the Atlantic slave trade and national structures such as the apartheid era in South Africa, which learned a great deal from Nazism's Aryan myths (see my *Landscapes of Holocaust Post-memory*, 2011).

Nathan Glazer, whose response includes an engaging section on his role in the 1950s as part of the journal *Commentary's* efforts to repress Holocaust memory, argues that Alexander's emphasis on the construction of the Holocaust as a presence

in U.S. culture means that facts, the events themselves, "fade into a murky background" (152). I found that Robert Manne's repeated use of "myth" (137, 140, 143) to describe the Holocaust falls prey to Glazer's concern regarding the overemphasis on construction rather than history. Glazer offers a commonsense analysis, grounded in his memories of the era, about why, in the immediate postwar period, survivors themselves were often reticent about relating their experiences. During my research, I have interviewed several survivors, and while of course their stories vary hugely, there has been a repeated refrain about their immediate postwar experience. If I amalgamate and paraphrase several interviews, the story would go like this: "Right after the war, when I finally made it to America, the American Jews among whom I was trying to forge a new life were not interested in war stories. Everyone wanted to move on. I married, I had children, I was busy with my career. It was only after the children were grown up, and in response to events such as the KKK's proposed march on Skokie in the 1970s that I began to talk about the Holocaust. And once I started talking I could not stop." Glazer shifts the conversation away from Alexander's emphasis on social construction and towards a more grounded interpretation of why there was a delay, in America at least, of some twenty or thirty

years before the full-fledged emergence of the Holocaust as a central historical event that has shaped much subsequent understanding not just of genocide but also of evil. I do not necessarily see Alexander's description of social construction at odds with Glazer's memory of why there was a delayed outpouring of testimony and its accompanying cultural representations because the effect of latency is the same, even though each attributes it to a different source.

Robert Manne rightly distinguishes between Novick and Alexander by noting that "if Novick is tone-deaf to the transformative power of the Holocaust story, Alexander is almost willfully blind to the interests the story serves" (142). I agree with this assessment in that Alexander seems to outline events without commenting explicitly on their larger political import. Indeed, this may be due to disciplinary difference, as Elihu Katz and Ruth Katz stress that, with the notable exception of Zygmunt Bauman, there have not been many inquiries regarding social construction of the Holocaust by sociologists. They argue that what happened historically is "all but lost to naming and not explaining" (166). Indeed, Alexander does seem to list rather than explicate.

The volume closes with Alexander's response to the responses; however, mention of these carefully constructed essays comes in

the footnotes rather than the body of the text, and this mention seems mainly to reiterate the argument of the 2002 essay: "Rather than losing steam," Alexander notes, "the coded and narrated symbol 'Holocaust' has become ever more heavily weighted. Its engorgement with evil is even more overflowing, its polluting power continuously on the rise" (176). Alexander again returns to this disturbing rhetoric of engorgement and polluting without examining how these tropes seem to make of this event an agent of corruption. Thus, while Alexander's essay offered a helpful framework through which to understand the historical transformation of the genocide of European Jewry from a part of World War II to a separate event encapsulating evil, the valence of his tone and the effects of his rhetoric remain unclear.

*Brett Ashley Kaplan received her doctorate from the Rhetoric Department at the University of California, Berkeley, and is now an associate professor in the Program in Comparative and World Literature and the Program in Jewish Culture and Society at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her books, Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation (University of Illinois Press, 2007) and Landscapes of Holocaust Postmemory (Routledge, 2011), examine the Shoah's intersections with art and space. She has published essays in Journal of Modern Jewish Studies, Comparative Literature Studies, International Studies in Philosophy, Philip Roth Studies, Comparative Literature, Images: Journal of Jewish Art and Culture, and Camera Austria, among other venues.*