

Alan Milchman

## Marxism and the Holocaust

In this essay, I want to make, and elaborate on, three claims. First, that the Holocaust is a transformational event,<sup>1</sup> a qualitative break in the historical trajectory of capitalist civilisation; indeed, a break so great that, as Enzo Traverso has argued, the Nazi genocide ‘requires us to rethink the twentieth century and the very foundations of our civilisation’.<sup>2</sup> Second, that as a qualitative break in the trajectory of capitalism, the Holocaust poses a fundamental challenge to Marxist theory, such that, for Alex Callinicos, ‘[n]o human phenomenon can put a stronger demand on the explanatory powers of Marxism’.<sup>3</sup> However, it seems to me that orthodox Marxism, at any rate, has been inadequate to that challenge, has failed to provide us with a coherent or persuasive explanation of the ‘Final Solution’. Third, no explanation of the Holocaust, of its origins or unfolding, that does not

---

<sup>1</sup> The concept of the Holocaust as a *transformational event* was first articulated by Alan Rosenberg, and subsequently elaborated by the two of us in a series of essays, most notably Milchman and Rosenberg 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Traverso 1999, p. 4. Traverso is one of those rare Marxist thinkers who has seriously grappled with the implications of the Holocaust for Marxist theory; who – in a series of books – has sought to utilise Marxism to understand the Nazi genocide and its singularity.

<sup>3</sup> Callinicos 2001, p. 385.

link it to the immanent tendencies of late capitalism, can provide us with a purchase on what Traverso has termed this tear in the very fabric of history [*l'histoire déchirée*].<sup>4</sup> In my view, it is necessary to forge a direct link between the Nazi genocide and the unfolding of the operation of the law of value; to recognise, with the German dramatist, cultural critic, and Marxist, Heiner Müller, that 'Auschwitz is the altar of capitalism'.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Holocaust as a break in history**

The origins of the Holocaust must be sought in the unprecedented and ever-increasing violence that has accompanied the unfolding of capitalism from its phase of the primitive accumulation of capital and the brutal expropriation of the immediate producers from their means of production, through the bloody colonial wars and orgies of mass murder that characterised the global expansion of capitalism, and that culminated in the mechanised slaughter of masses of conscript soldiers on the battlefields of the First World War. Within that bloodstained history, Auschwitz, understood as a synecdoche for organised and planned mass murder, marked the creation of a death-world in which the extermination of determinate groups of human beings had become the deliberate and systematic objective of the state. Thus, for Traverso,

[t]he 'final solution' appears to us today, at one and the same time, as the culminating point in an uninterrupted sequence of violence, injustice, and murder that has characterized Western development and as an unprecedented *break* in historical continuity. In other words, it is only by setting Auschwitz in a larger context of racist crimes and violence that its uniqueness may be perceived and analyzed.<sup>6</sup>

For Traverso, that uniqueness lies not in the numbers of those slaughtered, but rather in the fact that 'for the first time in history an attempt was made to eliminate a human group for reasons of "racist biology"'.<sup>7</sup> What is at stake in the Holocaust is not simply race hatred, which has characterised capitalism since its very inception, but rather the project – integrally linked to the development of science and technology brought about by capitalism – to

---

<sup>4</sup> This is the title of one of Traverso's volumes on the Holocaust.

<sup>5</sup> Müller 1991, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Traverso 1995, p. 105.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*