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**Citation:** Gaskell, G., Stares, S. & Fischler, C. (2013). Have GM crops and food a future in Europe? In: Successful Agricultural Innovation in Emerging Economies: New Genetic Technologies for Global Food Production. (pp. 331-347). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781139208475 doi: 10.1017/CBO9781139208475.024

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**Link to published version:** <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139208475.024>

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*Holocaust Memory: Between Universal and Particular*

David M. Seymour

*Introduction*

This essay is part of an ongoing project that looks at the way the Holocaust and ‘Holocaust memory’ comes to be subsumed within contemporary forms of antisemitism. The most recent and paradoxical illustration of this phenomenon concerns recent ‘debates’ around its now annual commemoration, Holocaust Memorial Day. At the core of these debates is the idea that Holocaust Memorial Day’s seemingly singular focus on nazi crimes against Jews which serves not only to ‘privilege’ its Jewish victims at the expense of others, but also, serves particularist Jewish interests, most notably, Jewish nationalism or ‘Zionism’.

One of the articulations of these ‘debates’ is through the language of ‘universalism’ and ‘particularism’. From this perspective, nazi crimes against Jews are presented as ‘universal crimes against humanity’. As a consequence, any emphasis or, indeed, recognition of their specifically *Jewish* dimensions is read as the illegitimate usurpation of universalism by narrow and parochial particularism. It is as a violation of the seemingly progressive standards of an abstract ‘humanity’ and of ‘universal human rights’ that the alleged specificity of Holocaust Memorial Day stands accused.

This essay examines the genealogy of these ‘debates’. The first section offers a critique of critical thought’s treatment of the Holocaust from the late 1980’s onward. In these works we see what I have termed the dissolution of the specifically or ‘particular’ Jewish aspects of nazism

into a more generic and abstract ‘universalism’.<sup>i</sup> In the second section, I discuss the consequences of this dissolution when re-articulated in the index of ‘morality’; that is, in the development of the Holocaust as moral symbol or ‘icon’. In the section that follows, I examine the ways in which the allegation of Jewish ‘particularism’ around the question of Holocaust memory and memorialization is said to stimulate the unravelling of the post-national and post-modern project of the ‘New Europe’. The final section looks at similar negative presentations of the Holocaust in the recent critical rejection of ‘ethics’ and a return to what is termed ‘the political’. I conclude by arguing that together, these attempts to understand the antisemitism run the risk of reproducing the very phenomenon it seeks to challenge. I begin, however, with some preliminary methodological comments.

### *I: Methodological Preliminaries*

The most concise way to explain the methodology underpinning this essay is with reference to Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of commodity fetishism or commodification.<sup>ii</sup> For Adorno and Horkheimer, commodification is the process whereby that which is unique and distinct is caught within the near universal realm of exchange. As a condition of entry into this realm uniqueness and distinctiveness has to be made amenable for its exchange with everything else. As a consequence, the specific or particular quality, in this case its inherent uniqueness which obstructs that exchange, has to be expunged. It is only when emptied of its particular substance and reformulated in strictly abstract, formalist and, so, universal terms, that the object becomes a commodity and can take its place within the ubiquitous realm of exchange.

Further, that which cannot be contained within the commodity, its expunged elements reappear as an unpredictable threat to the structure or system of commodification as a whole. Thus, while on the one hand, the commodity's formal attributes permit its inclusion within the realm of exchange, on the other hand, its now expunged, yet, threatening particularities (its content and substance) are recast as nothing more than superstitious myth having no place in an increasingly rationalized (i.e. commodified) world. They must be rejected from the world and, because they cannot be recognized in their universal aspects, become excluded and taboo.

## *II: Dissolving the Holocaust: The Universal over the Particular*

The notion of 'Holocaust dissolution' - that is, of dissolving the specifically Jewish dimensions of nazism into a broader, more universal concept or phenomenon - re-appears<sup>iii</sup> in many recent, critical accounts of the Holocaust. Here, one need only mention the writings of Zygmunt Bauman,<sup>iv</sup> Michel Foucault<sup>v</sup> and Giorgio Agamben<sup>vi</sup>. Despite the significant and important distinctions that exist between their works, their unifying theme is the connection between the Holocaust, the nation-state and the overarching concept of *modernity*.

For these thinkers, genocidal antisemitism is integral to the 'modernist project' that they see as the defining characteristic of the modern nation-state. In terms of content, this project is characterized as an obsession with the needs of national order and/or the health of the national population. It is in these contexts that the Jews are cast as the "Other", as the embodiment of the threat to such order and health. This project of order and health is both inaugurated and managed by the state, either directly or indirectly. It is the state which succeeds in classifying the populations under its domain according to the criteria of those who contribute to the health of the

body politic and those who pose a threat; that is, ‘those who shall live’ and ‘those who shall die’, respectively. Inscribed within the very essence of modernity itself, genocidal antisemitism becomes the expression of this policing of boundaries and the expression of the very nature of modern national sovereignty. Indeed, for Giorgio Agamben, this classifying function and the genocidal impulse it implies are present within the *praxis* of national law and juridical rights inherent within it.

It is in this context that the contours of Holocaust dissolution begins to appear. First, and most obviously, the placement of genocidal antisemitism within the generic concept of modernity serves to de-territorialize and dehistoricize the geographical and historical actualities of the Holocaust. It overlooks any meaningful consideration of why the Holocaust occurred at a specific place and at specific time (Germany in the mid-20th century). Correspondingly, it fails to acknowledge and account for the significance of the the diverse range of political regimes and their impact on the mass murders.

Implicit in this initial tendency to dissolve the particularism of genocidal antisemitism into abstract universals is the positivist nature of its conceptual schema. As no more than expressions of a ‘modern project’ whose aims and outcomes are read into modernity from its inception, related concepts such as the nation-state, sovereignty, law, nationalism, bureaucracy, the Jews, antisemitism, etc. appear on the scene in an equally ahistorical form. These concepts’ form and content, seemingly complete in meaning from their origin are simply posited. To adopt the words of Adorno and Horkheimer, they take on the appearance of ‘brute facts’. This presentation of modernity’s conceptual schema adopts the positivist mantra that what is, simply is. They take

on, in other words, the power of a fate or of a nature that cannot, nor could not be, otherwise. In this positivism any notion of conceptual development (a development in keeping with changes in social-political relations) is correspondingly abjured.

The positivism of these concepts is, in turn, reinforced through the idea that their origins can be traced back to an expression of a seemingly autonomous political sovereignty. Such a view is in keeping with the notion that genocidal antisemitism is a direct result of the state's (Bauman) or 'the sovereign's' (Agamben) power to construct the body politic under its domain in an image of its own making; in this instance, of a 'racially healthy' or 'ordered' society. The positing of such an origin accounts for the conflation of content that characterizes the apparent diversity of operative concepts. All concepts are presented as if they contain from their inception the inherent propensity of extermination, both jointly and severally. Not only, therefore, do such concepts contain the impulse to genocide, but also, because none serves as a challenge or limit to that impulse; all are implicated in equal measure.

In this context, therefore, the social, political and historical actualities of the Holocaust come to be dissolved within the nature of modernity as expressed through the modern nation state. Yet, this does not lead to the position that the post-holocaust or post-modern and post-national world has transcended (modern) antisemitism, that having transcended modernity's nation-state, we have, almost as a by-product, overcome its seemingly natural propensity to genocidal antisemitism. What it means is that by dissolving the Holocaust into the universalist concept of 'modernity' it is not so much *antisemitism* that is overcome (since it is robbed of any autonomous existence), but, rather, the old (i.e. modern) nation-state itself.

From this perspective, genocidal antisemitism, rooted in the nation-state *ab initio*, has become modernity's central defining characteristic, but says little about antisemitism that is neither nationalist, genocidal nor political in origin. As the critique above indicates, the possibility of the presence of politically autonomous, non-nationalist and non-genocidal antisemitism remains both invisible and untheorized. Indeed, By conflating antisemitism and genocidal antisemitism with modernity, we have the situation whereby no 'space' for antisemitism can be said to exist in the post-national and post-modern world.

The danger implicit in this way of thinking about antisemitism (now defined solely as genocidal antisemitism or the Holocaust) is that not only has it been relegated to the past, but it has also been overcome by the legitimizing force of a new world. As a consequence, any claim of non-genocidal antisemitism that draws on its memory even in the most general of terms runs the risk of being deemed illegitimate from the outset. Because genocidal antisemitism is recognized as the only antisemitism, it calls into question the anti-anti, or, rather, the non-antisemitic image of the post-modern world. It is, I believe, the potentially destabilizing effect of claims to antisemitism in post-national's gilded self-image that *partly* explains not only the *denial* of claims of contemporary antisemitism, but also the *intensity* of that denial.

In the wake of these modes of thinking, the propensity of these negative consequences took on a specifically 'moral' character. The reason for this shift of register arose through the idea, present both in Bauman and Agamben, that the political nature of the 'modernist project' of nation-building, the boundaries it demanded which characterized genocidal antisemitism brought with it

the repression of morality, understood in this context as a pre- or asocial concern with the 'Other'. In other words, if all other modes of being-together were seen as tainted by the *praxis* of the modernist project, only morality appeared as the appropriate glue in the era of the post-modern and post-national.

### *III: The Holocaust as Universal Moral Commodity*

In this section, I argue that the notion of commodification marks discussions of the post-national and post-modern adoption and adoption of genocidal antisemitism as a moral symbol. In so doing, it echoes the dissolution of the specificities of the Holocaust into formal universal terms outlined in the above section. As will be discussed, these notions of Holocaust dissolution and commodification are contained within Levy and Sznajder's recent work on 'Holocaust memory' and its place within the new global 'moral economy'.

It is in Levy and Sznajder's work on genocidal antisemitism and human rights that we see the distinction between the modernity of the nation-state and the post-modern world of post-nationality. It is within the context of that transition, that the moral effectiveness of the Holocaust is located,

The Holocaust constitutes an *epochal break*. It has, therefore, the potential of challenging basic national assumptions (like sovereign law in its own territory) and creating a cosmopolitanized public and political space that reinforces moral dependencies.....[W]hat has pushed the Holocaust to such prominence in public thinking has been the indispensable role it has served in the transition from a world of national

sovereignty to a new world of interconnectedness and toward a more cosmopolitanized global society., of which the proliferation of human rights regimes is a prominent manifestation.<sup>vii</sup>

Here, we see the Holocaust cast in the role of ‘epochal break’ between the old and the new *and* as containing the potential of bringing into existence the ‘new’ (whether in Europe or elsewhere). Yet, also present is a further oppositional couplet of Holocaust and Holocaust memory. Again, the first term is consigned to the past and the second is seemingly rooted in the present. However, in their representation of the Holocaust both in itself and in the context of the post-national and post-modern Holocaust memory, there is a line of continuity, the ‘transitional’ role it plays across the assumed demarcation. It is within that strand of continuity that the notion of Holocaust dissolution identified within contemporary explanations of the Holocaust comes to repeat itself in the present, ‘moral’ context.

From the perspective of a world that has now transcended modernity, that is, the conditions of the Holocaust’s possibility, all that remains is the *memory* of the Holocaust. But, as noted above, it is less a memory of the Holocaust itself, than a memory of the modernity into which the genocidal antisemitism was dissolved. Separated from the structural conditions that made it possible, the Holocaust of post-national and post-modern memory becomes nothing more than a symbol. It is a symbol, however, not of *antisemitism*, genocidal or otherwise, but of the ‘old world’, of modernity; a world, or at least, a Europe fragmented into nation-states along with its concomitants of national sovereignty, nationalism and the genocidal impulse said to be inherent within it.

Expressing its distance from the world that made the Holocaust possible, the new era's symbolic memory of the Holocaust is recast in the language of morality. The symbol's purpose and function is to serve as a warning to be sounded whenever and wherever any of the tendencies of the world of modernity threaten to reappear. Its moral imperative is contained in the maxim, 'Never Again Auschwitz'. It is to this symbolic value that Dubeil refers in his article, *The Remembrance of the Holocaust as a Catalyst for a Transnational Ethics* when he notes that,

For the Holocaust now provides the meta-narrative for sufferings inflicted for political reasons. It has turned into the supra-denominational passion story of late-modernity. Concepts, symbols and images are taken out of their immediate context and are employed to code, in a single term, the collective pain that people inflict on others. The symbolic repertoire has been adopted by political groups all over the world who are subject to extreme pain and distress. It is present in the political defense of human rights, in the re-moralizing of diplomacy, and in the turning away of the morally neutral *Realpolitik*.<sup>viii</sup>

We see here an example not only of Holocaust dissolution and re-surfacing as post-national and post-modern symbol, we also see its resurfacing outside the realm of politics and within the register of morality. Its symbolic representation within this register creates the context in which claims of contemporary antisemitism unrelated to genocidal impulse, the state, etc. can be denied and creates the conditions for the particular intensity of those denials.

Depicting its symbolic value in terms of its ‘abstract nature of ‘good and evil’’ [p.102], the Holocaust can only serve its role as universal warning and call to action once it has been abstracted from, or, rather emptied of the particularist elements of its historical occurrence, including, of course, its specifically Jewish dimensions (amongst which is the presence of antisemitism).

It is only in such circumstances that the Holocaust, now presented in abstract, formal and universal terms is it free to play the symbolic role allocated to it. In this form it takes its place as an ethical commodity within the exchange realm of the ‘new’ world’s moral economy. Moreover, it is only at this stage, when the Holocaust becomes freely exchangeable for any other number of situations, is its dissolution, that its transition to ‘symbol’, is complete.

It is as a consequence of ‘commodification’ and dissolution as the precondition of the commodity, that, as Levy and Sznajder note,

The Holocaust is now a concept that has been dislocated from time and space precisely because it can be used to dramatize any injustice, racism or crime perpetrated anywhere on the planet.<sup>ix</sup>

#### *IV: The Legacy of Jewish Particularism and Ressentiment*

In this context of the Holocaust as universal moral symbol of a past or, at the least, passing, era the *ressentiment* that Adorno and Horkheimer identify with the persistence of the particular comes to the fore. This issue can be articulated in the following way.

If the Holocaust has been denuded of its specifically Jewish aspects - which, as noted, is a necessary precondition for its role as universal symbol within the Holocaust memory of the post-Holocaust world - and has simultaneously been located firmly in the past, then any claim of a particular or specific historical connection between the past experience of Jews and their contemporary descendants becomes illegitimate. As a consequence, any claim to antisemitism either in its 'modern' form or relating to the post-modern and post-national world appears as an anachronism. The claim's 'untimeliness', moreover, that leaves itself vulnerable to the charges of 'special pleading' or of 'Jewish privilege'. In starker terms, contemporary Jewish recognition of the specifically Jewish aspects of nazism appears as a cynical manipulation of the now universal symbol of 'Holocaust memory'.

This potentiality is inherent within the nature of post-nationalism as distinct from its modern predecessor. If, in the era of 'modernity', it is the state and its obsession with order and boundaries that is said to have subsumed civil society and to have been the progenitor of all political and social identities and their respective valuations, post-modernity is characterized as its inverse. Post-nationalism is defined, in other words, as the subsumption of the state and of politics within the now seemingly emancipated realm of (at the least) a European (if not global) civil society. Freed from a situation in which the concept of 'Jew' and 'Jewishness' gained their meaning from the ascription of state power, Jews today, like any other members of civil society are free to adopt, adapt or reject their 'Jewish identity voluntarily. Diana Pinto captures this point succinctly when she notes the state's centrality in this formation of identity in the era of modernity as contrasted to the vibrancy of post-national civil society,

We have entered the age of Jewishness as an integral component of civil society rather than as something rigidly determined by the state - be it a generous and benign state or, indeed, a malevolent and even murderous one like Nazi Germany.....[Conversely,] Jews in today's Europe are 'voluntary' Jews: they are no longer anywhere defined by the state or officially constrained in any way. Jews are free to stop being Jews, to emigrate and, most importantly, to define their Jewishness in whatever terms they like. Jewishness has ceased to be something shaped by the state and has become an integral component of European civil society.<sup>x</sup>

Yet, it is precisely in this context of 'voluntariness' of Jewish identity within the fluidity of post-national 'Europe's' civil society that Pinto offers the image of contemporary Jewry as an anachronism. Jews have not participated fully in this historical trajectory and taken advantage of what amounts to its new mode of emancipation. From the quote above, Pinto continues,

Jews must have the courage to identify themselves with that civil society, to loosen their anachronistic ties to the state and to encourage greater flexibility in the definition of who is or who is not a Jew.<sup>xi</sup>

At the heart of this notion of 'Jewish anachronism' is the continuing connection Jews make to the Holocaust as a specifically *Jewish* memory,

[Jews] must look beyond the Holocaust, to regard themselves not as victims but as a vibrant force engaged in the ongoing creation of their country's cultural identity.<sup>xii</sup>

Pinto argues that not only does contemporary Jewry, seemingly tied to an outmoded past in general, and to the memory of the Holocaust in particular, remain blind to the emancipatory prospects offered by post-nationalism, but it also runs the risk of appearing to make claims for special treatment unavailable to those other groups with whom they negotiate their own identity,

What is significant is that Jewishness is now one among the many specific manifestations of a working pluralist democracy rather than a special category with special rights and privileges (and taboos) which are not available to any other group. Only in this spirit can Jews participate in a newly defined sense of national and European 'belonging'.<sup>xiii</sup>

Here, Pinto's argument dovetails with Levy and Sznajder's representation of the Holocaust of contemporary Holocaust memory, as a universal symbol for contemporary injustices and human rights abuses and as simultaneously a rupture *and* a bridge or hinge between the old and the new worlds,

The integration of the Holocaust into the mainstream of European history, and its attainment of symbolic centrality in the contemporary European consciousness fifty years after the end of the Second World War, can only have a liberating effect on European Jews. Their personal and collective experiences as Jews have been woven into the fabric of the continent's own historical past in an unprecedented manner.....It allows Jews to perceive Jewish life in Europe after the Holocaust in positive terms, and not only as a remnant of the rich, pre-war communal

experience. Because it is not shared with others, that unspeakable caesura will, in time, become a bridge to a reconstructed European identity rather than an abyss.<sup>xiv</sup>

These words, written in 1996 in the wake of the transformations of 1989, articulate the (albeit cautious) optimism of the times. Ten years later, writing on the same topic - the Jews' place and role in post-national Europe, Pinto is less sanguine. One of the central themes of her criticism turns on what she sees as European Jewry's insistence on memorializing the particularity of the Holocaust's Jewish dimension.

Again set within the context of contemporary Europe's transcending the modernist state of affairs that gave rise to the *praxis* of genocidal antisemitism, Pinto argues that Jews' continued return to the Holocaust has resulted in a double meaning to the post-Holocaust maxim, 'Never Again'. Cast in the language of a conflict between universalism and particularism, and one that represents the distance she believes exists between the parochialism of European Jewry and post-national European society, Pinto notes,

Through nearly a quarter of a century of Holocaust commemorations, the Jewish story has become an integral, even *iconic*, part of Europe's own self-understanding and democratic organization. Yet Jews increasingly feel alienated from the continent, in a parting of the two 'never agains'. The European understanding of the post-war 'never again' became a 'never again' to war, to xenophobia, to racial discrimination and to colonialism with a positive commitment to human rights. The Israeli and

Jewish understanding of ‘never again’ became instead based on the credo that ‘never again’ would the fate of Jews depend on anyone but themselves, be it another country or international body, in the daily equivalent of an all out existential war. The split has become ever more visible with respect to Israel’s situation, but also, through Israel, with respect to the Jewish interaction with Europe’s ‘others’.<sup>xv</sup>

Read in this light, Jewish memorializing of the Holocaust appears not only to have placed an obstacle between the full integration of European Jews within the new pan-European civil society, a failure that Pinto ascribes to Jews’ ‘inability to learn from the lessons of history,’<sup>xvi</sup> but also gives rise to a ‘new type of Jew’. This new Jewish type is defined as one that places the narrowness of nationalist (i.e. Zionist) and communal interests over and above what Pinto sees as a previous, i.e. pre-Holocaust, Jewish commitment to humanist and cosmopolitan values. Implicit, here, is the idea that within in contemporary Europe, it is European Jewry who is replicating precisely the type of nationalism and ethnocentricity that with the advent of post-nationalism has been not only consigned to the past, but also has been attributed sole responsibility for genocide in general and genocidal antisemitism in particular,

Europe’s own Jews, already transformed through immigration and through the threats to Israel were radicalized in the process. The old humanist, intellectual Jews interested in universal values and human rights and seeking reintegration in their respective countries have given way to another type of Jew with visible community power who feels far more ethnically Jewish, whose motto is toughness against dangerous

‘others’, and who is slowly becoming the equivalent of an Israeli patriot  
abroad.<sup>xvii</sup>

This development, or transformation of types, from Jews’ commitment to a post-national cosmopolitan universalism (before the event) to a narrow parochialist nationalism (after the event) along with European’s Jewry’s apparent self-exclusion from contemporary European civil society is linked explicitly to a specifically Jewish memorialization of the Holocaust. Pinto continues,

In what can be perceived as the belated poisoned fruits of the Holocaust, it is those who did not experience it, rather than its survivors, who are turning their backs to the European world. The survivors did not think of themselves as *sanctified victims*, but their successors (whether direct or not), increasingly think of themselves in these terms, with *respect to a hostile outside world* [emphasis added]<sup>xviii</sup>

Paradoxically for Pinto, it is the Holocaust’s new status as *universal icon* and what she sees as contemporary European Jewry’s refusal to accept this in the name of ‘particularism’ that contains the threat to the new post-national universal values,

Unwillingly and unwittingly, Jews have become ‘icons’ in Europe’s new commemorative pluralist democracies.....For, simply put, all ‘others’ across Europe, particularly Muslims and blacks, wish to become like ‘the Jews’. We have now entered an era of the competition of memories.....The desire to integrate other narratives of suffering is

natural and should not be perceived as a threat by Jews, keen on putting fences around the Holocaust to protect its unique horror. But this implies having Jews who are willing to return to the logic of a national commonwealth, and shared universal values rather than stressing the uniqueness of the Holocaust or of the *Ostjuden* past or of the ethnic/religious Jewish pedigree. Stressing such uniqueness can only lead at best to a situation of power brokerage with other minorities, not that of a genuine common action. Hence the need to go back to the post war ideals of reintegration and common humanist values, precisely what the Holocaust survivors taught.<sup>xix</sup>

In the context of an era in which both ‘the Jews’ and ‘the Holocaust’ have taken on the aura of ‘icon’ and in which the Jewish aspects of the Holocaust have been dissolved into an abstract and formal universality the commemoration of the specificities of Jewish experience are said to oppose and counter its contemporary universal ‘message’ or ‘lesson’. For Pinto, this apparent stubborn insistence on Jewish particularity in the face of universalism appears as an untimely and irrational return to and reminder of a bygone age. Moreover, responsibility for this reminder and attempted return lies with the Jews as they unravel the optimistic promise of a harmonious post-national Europe.

One of the ironies of Pinto’s critique of the particularism of European Jewry as an effective counter to the universalism of post-nationalism is the ways it echoes the treatment of Jews in the context of the modern (i.e. pre-Holocaust) nation-state.

Pinto notes that one of the characteristics of the ‘modern’ nation-state was not only its classificatory schema in which ‘identities’ were determined, but also, its corresponding demand of their Jews for complete assimilation within the national body-politic. Viewed from this perspective, Jewish particularism came to be formulated as a threat to the, then, new ‘universalism’ of the nation (i.e. its inclusion of all who lived within its territory under the rubric of ‘the nation’). Refusal to assimilate was often cast in the problematic language of Jewish stubbornness at best and, over time, as a characteristic of ‘Jewishness’ itself. Pinto’s increasing frustration at what she sees as a divergence between (the promise of a) post-national European civil society and the emergence of a ‘new type of Jew’ whose defining characteristics are narrow parochialism and nationalism, is similarly articulated through the language of a conflict between universal (European) values and particular (Jewish) values. The difference now is that the major site of contestation is that of Holocaust memory and Holocaust memorialization.

*V: The Return to ‘the Political’*

There is little doubt that, over the past while, critical accounts of the Holocaust and Holocaust memory has shifted from its incorporation into a discourse of ethics to that of, if not ‘politics’, then, ‘the political’. However, as I argue here, despite this change in ‘register’, the problem of “Holocaust memory’ potentiality inverting into an antisemitic resource still remain. Nowhere is this point more in evidence than in the work of the French theorist, Alain Badiou.

As with the Agamben, Bauman and Pinto, but in more overt if different terms, Badiou locates both the Holocaust and Holocaust memory along the axis of universal and particular. However,

unlike these other thinkers who universalise genocidal antisemitism through its dissolution within the modern nation-state, Badiou recognises its occurrence in a particular time and a particular place. Yet, the notion of universalism reappears in his discussion of the causes and meaning of the Holocaust. Here, the *ressentiment* brought about by commemoration of its specifically Jewish aspects comes to the fore. Less nuanced than the accounts discussed, Badiou's account of Holocaust memory as a vehicle of alleged Jewish 'privilege' connects not only to questions of Israel and Palestine, but also is read back to the events of the genocide itself. In other words, the gap or space between the Holocaust and its memorialization - that is, between the fate of the Jews and Jewish commemoration - is closed by Badiou.

Since a full account of Badiou's thinking on these issues is beyond the scope of the present essay, a brief resume will have to suffice.

Badiou explains nazism and its murderous obsession with the Jews by reference to his concept of 'the Universal'. Badiou's 'Universal' is situated in an ontological 'void' that lies repressed by and isolated from the mundane social world. Its content is that of a generic human freedom, one that is absent from all existing social divisions and which contains humanity in its all indissoluble 'oneness'. For Badiou, national socialism was the attempt by one particulate (i.e. one aspect of the social world - 'the Germans' or 'the Aryans') to present itself as if it were the 'true' universal. This 'simulacrum' of the Universal brought it into conflict with and demanded the further repression of, if not destruction of its authentic counterpart. It was as representatives or embodiments of such Universalism the Jews' fate was sealed,

In the case of Nazism, the void made its return under one privileged name in particular, the name 'Jew'. There were certainly others as well, the Gypsies, the mentally ill, homosexuals, communists.....But the name 'Jew' was the name of names.....The choice of this name relates, without any doubt to its obvious links with universalism - to what was in fact already *void* about this name - that is, what was connected to the universality and eternity of truths.<sup>xx</sup>

The Holocaust was thus an assault on the ontological Universal. From this perspective Badiou is able to frame his claims that inherent in Jewish commemoration of the nazi mass murders of Jews is a *praxis* of Jewish 'privilege' (not to say Jewish 'power').

Badiou's starting point is the legitimate problem of the connection between the nazi conception of 'the Jew' and those flesh and blood Jews and non-Jews caught within its murderous net. However, rather than recognising the difficulties in these connections, Badiou posits a radical disconnection. In the context of Holocaust memory, this disconnect appears between those murdered and contemporary Jewry. He writes that to discern such a link,

[I]t would be necessary to explain how and why the Nazi predicate 'Jew', such as it was used to organize separation, then deportation and death, coincides with the subjective predicate under which the alliance [i.e. between those murdered as Jews under National Socialism and post-Holocaust Jews] is sealed.<sup>xxi</sup>

Yet he implies that this explanation is not forthcoming; indeed, the question remains unasked in the fields of Holocaust memory. Moreover, it is the presumption the unproblematic connection that Badiou claims plants the seeds of contemporary Jewish privilege. Framing his argument in a radical critique of society dominated by a culture of 'victim-status', he argues that the unique nature of Nazi crimes against the Jews gives, in a rather unfortunate turn of phrase, 'the name' 'Jew' an advantageous 'surplus-value',

Of course, for those who for religious reasons, have maintained this this predicate ['Jew'] registers a communal alliance with the archetypal transcendence of the Other, it is natural to think that Nazi atrocities work in some way to validate - in a terrible and striking paradox - the election of the 'people' that this predicate, so they say, gathers together.<sup>xxii</sup>

[p.161]

The implication here is that what amounts to the doomed 'chosen' status allocated Jews by the Nazis is now inverted into a privilege within an ethically-based social hierarchy. In this way, therefore, Jewish *powerlessness* is inverted into Jewish *power*,

The basic argumentation, of course, refers to the extermination of European Jews by the Nazis and their accomplices. In the victim ideology that constitutes the campaigning ideology of contemporary moralism, this unprecedented extermination is held to be paradigmatic. In and of itself, the extermination would underpin the political, legal and moral necessity to hold the word 'Jew' above all handling of identity predicates and to give it some kind of nominal sacralization.....The

progressive imposition of the word ‘Shoah’ .....can be taken as a verbal stage of this sacralizing of victims. By a remarkable irony, one thereby comes to the point of applying the name ‘Jew’ to that which all Christians originally directed against the Jews themselves, what was that ‘Christ’ was a worthier name than all others.

Moreover, the power and privilege that comes with such ‘sacrilization’ and the unique status implicit within it is, for Badiou, far from innocent. Rather, it is pressed into direct service for the protection of what is seen as the illegitimate defence of particularist Jewish interests, most notably, the State of Israel,

Today it is not uncommon to read that ‘Jew’ is indeed a name beyond ordinary names. And it seems that, like an inverted original sin, the grace of having been an incomparable victim can be passed down not only to descendants of descendants, but to all who come under the predicate in question, be they heads of state or armies engaging in severe oppression of those whose lands they have confiscated.....Less rational is the claim that we can find means in the Nazi gas chambers with which to confer on the colonial state of Israel.....some special status, a status other than the one that all colonial states already have conferred on them for some decades.....<sup>xxiii</sup>

It is in this context of what Badiou sees as the usurpation of the universalism of the Holocaust in the name of an illegitimate and self-serving Jewish particularism of Holocaust memory that

claims of contemporary antisemitism (specifically claims that relate to those forms of antisemitism that mask themselves as ‘criticism of Israel’)<sup>xxiv</sup> are to be rejected both as anachronistic and as the product of *mal fide* and self-interest,

It is wholly intolerable to be accused of anti-Semitism by anyone for the sole reason that, from the fact of the extermination, one does not conclude as to the predicate ‘Jew’ and its religious and communitarian dimension that it receive some singular valorization - a transcendent annunciation! - nor that Israeli exactions, whose colonial nature is patent and banal, be specially tolerated. I propose that nobody any longer accept, publicaly or privately, this type of political blackmail.<sup>xxv</sup>

Indeed, for Badiou, so entrenched is this conception of Jewish privilege and power born of Holocaust memory that it is no longer a resource solely available to contemporary Jewry, but has now been ‘instrumentalised’ as nothing more than a weapon in the (French) State armoury of reaction; a weapon to be wielded against any and all opposition, real or imagined. It is with these thoughts in mind that Badiou signs off his recent essay, *Reflections on Anti-Semitism* with a call to action. Having presented claims of the existence of contemporary antisemitism, ‘reminiscent of the logic of fascism’ and a ‘genuine provocation.....so serious and so incongruous that we can well imagine it leaves some people speechless’ he concludes what amounts to a political manifesto not against antisemitism, but, rather, against claims of the presence of antisemitism within the post-Holocaust era,

In the end it is both impossible and unnecessary to defend oneself. The only effective reaction is attack. We have to dismantle the mechanism, show what position the accusers are speaking from, what their past is, what their political reasons are, what personal benefits they draw from their lives, what their connections and associations are, We have to make clear, and this is the object of the present essay, a question whose importance is not negligible: what the real and reactionary function is today, in the arena of the incessant combat that has divided the French intelligentsia for three hundred years - for or against popular revolutions - of this violent and shameless word 'anti-Semitism'.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### *Conclusion*

A central theme of this essay has been to note the ways in which recent developments echo Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis that antisemitism must be understood in the context of the domination of the universal over the particular. It is from the perspective of a triumphant universal, that the particular must be sacrificed. In the face of this universalism the continued and stubborn presence of the particular appears as nothing more than an untimely reminder of times past and a threat to what is believed to have been overcome or transcended. As such a threat and such a reminder that it attracts increasing levels of hostility and attempts at exclusion. In this essay, I have indicated the ways in which certain strands of critical thinking on the Holocaust and Holocaust memory echo Adorno and Horkheimer's diagnosis. More specifically, I have argued that what amounts to critical thought's exclusive emphasis on what is seen as the abstract universalism of nazism gives rise to a *ressentiment* when confronted with the presence and

commemoration of its irreducible Jewish aspects. The irony here, of course, is that having drawn a line between the modern and post-modern or post-Holocaust world, the very same thinking that has sought to understand the antisemitism of the past, era simultaneously runs the risk of bringing it into the present one.

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<sup>i</sup> David M. Seymour; *Law, Antisemitism and the Holocaust*; London, Glasshouse-Routledge 2007, ch.4

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid* ch.1; Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; London, Verso 1999, 1-34; 137-172

<sup>iii</sup> I say, re-appears' because of the fact that such 'universalism' appeared initially in the Soviet bloc accounts of nazism in the immediate aftermath of 1945, and can still be found in memorials at various concentration and death camps.

<sup>iv</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters*; Oxford, Polity Press 1987; *Modernity and the Holocaust*; Oxford Polity Press, 1991, *Modernity and Ambivalence*; Oxford Polity Press 1993

<sup>v</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*, edited by Mauro Bertani and Allesando Fontana, translated by David Macey, London, Allen Lane 2003

<sup>vi</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Rozen; Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press 1998; *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive*, translated by Daniel Heller-Rozen; New York, Zone Books 2000; *State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attell; Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2005

<sup>vii</sup> Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, "The Institutionalization of Cosmopolitan Morality: The Holocaust and Human Rights," 3(2) *Journal of Human Rights* (2004) pp.143-157 at pp.143 and 155

<sup>viii</sup> Helmet Dubiel, "The Remembrance of the Holocaust as a Catalyst for a Transnational Ethics?," *New German Critique* No. 90: Taboo, Trauma, Holocaust (2003) pp.59-70 at p.61

<sup>ix</sup> Levy and Sznaider, *Cosmopolitan Morality* p.156

<sup>x</sup> Diane Pinto, "A New Jewish Identity for Post-1989 Europe" *jpr / policy paper* No. 1 1996, p.6 and p.1

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.* p.1

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.* p.1

<sup>xiii</sup> *ibid* p.10

<sup>xiv</sup> *ibid* p.3

<sup>xv</sup> Diane Pinto. "Are there Jewish Answers to Europe's Questions?." *European Judaism* 39, no. 2 (October 2006): 47-57 at p.49

<sup>xvi</sup> On the problematic notion of the presentation of the Holocaust as an exercise in moral and political pedagogy, Seymour, *Law*, pp,33-35; David M. Seymour, 'From Auschwitz to Gaza: Ethics for the Want of Law', 6(2) *Journal of Global Ethics*, 205.

<sup>xvii</sup> Pinto, 'European Questions' p.50

<sup>xviii</sup> Pinto, 'European Questions' p.51

<sup>xix</sup> Pinto, 'European Questions' p.51

<sup>xx</sup> Alain Badiou,, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, translated by Peter Hallward; London, Verso 2001 p.75

<sup>xxi</sup> Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, translated by Steve Corcoran; London, Verso 2006 p.161

<sup>xxii</sup> *ibid* p.161

<sup>xxiii</sup> *ibid.* p.161 and p.162

<sup>xxiv</sup> It is important to emphasize the truism that not all criticism of Israel and anti-Zionist commentary is antisemitic. It is rather the manner in which the recognition of antisemitic imagery within such 'criticism' is met with allegations of mendacity and bad faith. Nowhere is this phenomenon more in evidence than in the increasing prevalence of reference to what is termed 'the Zionist (or Israel) Lobby'. As with its 'Jewish' forebears, it is attributed wield omnipotent power within the heart governments, political parties, the news media, 'Hollywood and so on and so forth.

<sup>xxv</sup> *ibid* p.162

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<sup>xxvi</sup> Alain Badiou and Eric Hazan, “‘Anti-Semitism Everywhere’ in France Today” in Alain Badiou, Eric Hazan and Ivan Segre, *Reflections on Anti-Semitism*, translated by David Fernbach; London, Verso 2013 p.42

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