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‘Everyone’s a victim’, or: ‘The world as a concentration camp’

Relativizing Auschwitz with Adorno

“reducing tormentor and tormented to the common denominator ‘victims’ by means of a dialectical pirouette.”

(Jean Améry)¹

In his book *The concept of negative dialectics*² Marc Nicholas Sommer claims to reconstruct Theodor W. Adorno’s negative philosophy of history as a “philosophy of history from the viewpoint of the victims” (294). Sommer suggests, following Adorno,³ that “since World War II every subject” has become “a potential victim of history” (295). “Every single one” could now “potentially” experience himself as a victim of “the utmost extreme” (“des Äußersten”) (295). Concurring with Adorno Sommer defines “the utmost extreme” as ““delusional prejudice, oppression, genocide, and torture””.⁴ Also in accordance with Adorno, Sommer sometimes uses the phrasing the “ever-present catastrophe”⁵ (325) instead of the utmost extreme. Indeed, Sommer readily concedes “that not every single one actually experiences himself as a potential victim” (325) and insofar perhaps people living in more or less functioning constitutional states have better protection against ‘the utmost extreme’ than those living in authoritarian states and under dictatorships, but – and this is his main argument – “with the nuclear bomb a new power has appeared”, making the “utmost extreme” possible for every person. In agreement with Günther Anders he refers to his diagnosis that “the threat of nuclear war [...] transforms the world into a hopeless concentration camp”⁶(325). Sommer uses the term “concentration camps” for being at the mercy of the “arbitrariness of the guards”, for the irrelevance of one’s own behavior regarding the question of whether one becomes a victim or not, and for a not further specified extermination. Further details are not given. Elsewhere, he uses the term “Auschwitz” instead of “concentration camp” (or simply “camp”). Sommer defines the term Auschwitz – once again in reference to Adorno – as ““administrative murder of millions””.⁷ With the nuclear bomb the “experience of camp inmates” has been generalized, “that the disaster of the arbitrariness of the guards can befall them at any given time, regardless of their behavior. The nuclear bomb transforms the world into a concentration camp because it constantly threatens us with the possibility of total extermination – regardless of how we behave.” (295f.)

In my opinion, Sommer can justifiably refer to some statements within the writings of Adorno, and insofar he should be thanked for putting these tendencies in the open which many Adorno-disciples like to ignore. My focus here is not on Adorno himself – a critical analysis of his work regarding these

¹ Jean Améry, *Jargon der Dialektik*, in: Améry, Werke, Bd. 6. Aufsätze zur Philosophie, Stuttgart 2004, p. 265.

² Marc Nicholas Sommer, *Das Konzept einer negativen Dialektik. Adorno und Hegel*, Tübingen 2016.

³ Sommer refers to Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom. Lectures 1964-1965*, Cambridge/Malden, p. 23.

⁴ Sommer refers to Theodor W. Adorno, *Taboos on the Teaching Vocation*, in: *Critical Models. Interventions and Catchwords*, New York/Chichester, West Sussex 2005, p. 190.

⁵ Sommer refers to Theodor W. Adorno, “Static” and “Dynamic” as Sociological Categories [1956/1961]. *Diogenes*, No. 33 (Spring 1961), p. 46.

⁶ Sommer refers to Günther Anders, *Die atomare Bedrohung*, München 1993, p. 94.

⁷ Sommer refers to Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. New York/London 2007, p. 362.

tendencies has not yet been achieved. I believe it is of more importance that Sommer's (and partly Adorno's too and entirely Anders's) statements are downright textbook examples for "identity thinking" in the worst possible sense, understood here as identification of actually very different facts by indiscriminately subsuming specific phenomena under one general term (for example "the utmost extreme", "the catastrophe", "the negative", "barbarity", "extermination" et cetera). In the following, I will briefly illustrate that Sommer's negative philosophy of history - in a suggestive and factually unjustifiable manner - identifies the negative continuity of the history of domination for thousands of years (suffering, oppression, alienation), modern technical overkill potentials (nuclear bomb) and the Shoah ('Auschwitz') and thereby brings about a veritable relativization of Auschwitz that allows a 'critical' exculpation of the perpetrators responsible for the Shoah (and their representatives today). It is not my intention at all to "undialectically" divide "history into civilization and barbarity"⁸, but – with all existing continuities – to sharpen the perspective regarding "the utmost extreme".

I: It would be helpful if Sommer clearly defined the difference between extermination camps⁹ and other National Socialist concentration camps. For the understanding of the specifics of the Shoah – that is "Auschwitz" (360), which Sommer also uses – it is necessary to reflect upon this crucial difference. In place of this reflection, Sommer uses the terms mentioned before (arbitrariness, innocence) and a diffuse term of extermination which remains untold who should be exterminated by whom and why. We will see that these uncertainties within the term extermination are constitutive for Sommer's further reasoning.

II: Arbitrariness and torture as well as the detention of innocent people in camps are not specifics of National Socialism, but to a great extent features of other 'totalitarian' regimes. Furthermore, mass murder of innocent people, the anonymous death, cruel torture and execution practices were an integral part of many historic wars and crimes. Why precisely "Auschwitz" and not the crusades or the so called 'Mongol invasion of Europe' are considered the "turning point [...]" (360) in history, the 'break of civilization', remains incomprehensible. If Sommer argued that this statement that the individual behavior of people has absolutely no influence in regards to the possible victim status, means that they have been designated by a totalitarian ideology as enemies who have to be combated and exterminated without alternative simply because they exist or certain attributes are projected onto them, this would be a possible difference from for example the 'Mongol invasion of Europe'. Sommer omits such differentiations as his reasoning is on a totally different level which ignores the ideological motivation completely. I will come back to this point (see IV).

III. The fact that they were administratively organized "may have been the least of their problems for the ghetto-, concentration camp- and extermination camp-inmates".¹⁰ The topos Sommer quotes and which Adorno as well as Arendt and Anders equally refer to, the "industrial" or "administrative mass murder" or – as Sommer also labels it – "organized mass murder [...]", is equally useless for the understanding of the specifics of the Shoah – and therefore for the understanding of the 'break of civilization'. It does not take into consideration the fact that approximately 40% of the six million murdered Jews, not to mention the other victims of the Nazis, weren't gassed in "death factories"

⁸ Jean Améry, Jargon der Dialektik, in: Améry, Werke, Bd. 6. Aufsätze zur Philosophie, Stuttgart 2004, p. 266.

⁹ I am aware that the term 'extermination' itself is ultimately a Nazi terminology. But firstly Sommer uses this terminology to prove his main thesis and secondly it is in any case nearly impossible to speak about the Shoah in a language which does not use the language of the perpetrators. If I spoke of murder camps it is possible that the thought of murder as a common criminal offence could rise, which would also be inadequate for an understanding of the specifics of these actions and institutions. Nevertheless it is also impossible to entirely rid oneself of the traditional vocabulary of criminal law.

¹⁰ Fabian Kettner, Ist die Postmoderne ein Reflex auf den Holocaust? http://rote-ruhr-uni.com/cms/IMG/pdf/Kettner_Zangl_Poetik.pdf, p. 4.

but rather conventionally shot and slain behind the frontlines.¹¹ It also disregards the ideological motivation of many perpetrators and their at times vast freedom of action.¹² Ultimately this results in the false belief that the allegedly 'industrial' and 'administrative' *method* of murder is specific to the Shoah, instead of the unique intent to murder and its consequent execution.

IV. Sommer could now respond that he is not concerned with the specifics of the Shoah. And he indeed ultimately considers 'Auschwitz' and 'Hiroshima' equally as historical 'turning points'. Here begins another problematic if not to say: a catastrophic blurring of all important historical and political differences. Why does the nuclear bomb according to Anders and Sommer transform the world into a "concentration camp"? This reasoning consists of the alleged similarities of "concentration camp" and nuclear threat, whereas "concentration camp" is now more distinctly connoted with a not further specified 'extermination': Firstly, the threat of nuclear death is one that is in "no relation anymore" (295) to the actions of the threatened. Secondly, the nuclear bomb threatens humanity with "total extermination" (296). In this case, Sommer categorizes historically radically different aspects into poor abstractions: 'innocence' of the victims and their 'extermination'.

The specifics of the NS extermination camps however do not consist of the practice or the threat of indiscriminate extermination of all people. Primarily, the goal was to murder Jews – namely to murder each and every Jew –, because they were declared by the National Socialist ideology to be the 'evil, subversive, abstract element' of modernity per se, the 'enemy of nations'. This declaration of enmity had nothing to do with the behavior of real Jews. Sommer's reasoning abstracts from these specifics of the total-genocidal anti-Semitic motivation,¹³ whereas *only* their implementation constitutes the *break in civilization*, the radical difference to the Mongol invasion and to simple "oppression", to unspecified "genocide" and to "torture". Even though one could (and should) accuse Adorno of such poor abstractions, at least it is also Adorno, with his Erich Fromm trained thoughts regarding the authoritarian character and his, by all means ambivalent, studies on anti-Semitism, who significantly contributed to the understanding of the specifics of the Shoah. Sommer buries these aspects of Adorno's thinking beneath his own version of a negative philosophy of history.

The threat of total extermination of all human life, which emanates from the potential use of the nuclear bomb,¹⁴ is to begin with an ideologically-politically completely undefined threat. Indeed, it is not a matter of technical possibilities of extermination, but rather a matter of who wants to exterminate who and with what intent. Even if in the course of the bloc confrontation humanity had been eliminated by a nuclear war we would be dealing with something entirely different from Auschwitz, because declaredly neither of the two sides had the intention to exterminate humanity per se and neither side had expressed a declaration of enmity analogue to the National Socialist one. Neither the USA nor the USSR for example – even with all the enmity between them – viewed the

¹¹ See Ulrich Herbert, Vernichtungspolitik. Neue Antworten und Fragen zur Geschichte des „Holocaust“. In: Ders. (Hg.), Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik. Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen, Frankfurt/M., p. 57.

¹² The critique of this administration topos has meanwhile been developed in depth by authors like Daniel Goldhagen, Alf Lüdtke, Yaacov Lozowick, Ulrich Herbert, Nicolas Berg, Michael Wildt, Felix Römer and many others.

¹³ See, regarding the specific genocidal intentionality of the Nazis in the Shoah: Steven T. Katz, The 'Unique' Intentionality of the Holocaust, in: Modern Judaism Vol 1/1981 and Yehuda Bauer, Rethinking the Holocaust, New Haven/London 2001.

¹⁴ Besides, a limited use is also conceivable. In this case too, not 'all people' are always and in principle victims of a nuclear attack.

entire population of the opposition as ‘the epitome of evil’ and ‘parasites to be eradicated’.¹⁵ But if for example leading representatives of the Islamist regime in Iran consider eradicating Israel with a nuclear bomb,¹⁶ then there are in fact similarities between the extermination committed by National Socialism and the extermination which the nuclear bomb is supposed to cause. It is essential that we have to answer this question on an ideological-political level and that it is futile to compare technical threats to ideologically motivated politics of extermination. In this case not only are notarial charges being compared to red beets, they are being identified.¹⁷ In this respect, Adorno’s statement that “nuclear bomb and gas chamber have fatal structural similarities”¹⁸ is also either trivial or pointless or wrong. Trivial if meaning that both technical means enable the murder of many people from a certain distance (whereby this is doubtful regarding the gas chamber, as a direct contact between victim and perpetrator had taken place before and after the killing, even if this contact could partially be delegated to the Sonderkommandos). Pointless if by technical means one tries to make a statement about the ideological intent of murdering, which is impossible. Wrong if ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Hiroshima’ are equated – even if only “structurally”. To put it bluntly: In this case Auschwitz is a mere pretext and the Shoah turns into a mere “accusatorial-emblem[.]”.¹⁹

The ‘Post-Auschwitz-Situation’ which, according to Adorno, we are living in is not characterized by the existence of technical means of mass murder but by the fact that the utmost extreme has already happened, under National Socialism the threat of murder of millions of (Jewish) people without a however mediated economic, geopolitical or demographic purpose became reality.²⁰

V. “When the possibility of total extermination becomes the scale” (325) for a negative terminology of history, then ‘we all’ can finally perceive ourselves as indiscriminate victims ‘of history’. When this “extermination” is in such a way ideologically-politically unspecified as it is in Sommer’s case, then the “potential” threat of a nuclear war and the real threat of ‘eradication’ for Jews become one and the same (as well as the real killing of thousands of civilians in Hiroshima and the real killing of millions of Jews would be of one and the same quality). This exculpatory tendency began directly after the Shoah and can be found in various forms within the works of Hannah Arendt, Bruno Bettelheim, Günther Anders or Martin Heidegger. In the year 2016, an author who claims his

¹⁵ When for example Ronald Reagan called ‘communism’ the realm of evil he meant that the Russians had to be freed from ‘evil communism’ as an ideology and system of oppression, not that they as people had to be exterminated entirely. In this respect it is also incorrect when Sommer claims that the nuclear threat *per se* existed totally unrelated to the behavior of people. To some extent this might apply to the normal citizen, but not to the government. Had the USSR transformed itself into a pro-American capitalist state, the threat of a nuclear confrontation would have failed to materialize. A similar option of ‘conversion’ was not available to the Jews and also the Judenräte under National Socialism.

¹⁶ See <http://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article13713449/Israels-Angst-vor-Ahmadinedschads-Holocaust.html>

¹⁷ It is indicative for the hypostasized way of speaking, into which a ‘negative philosophy of history’ proceeding in this manner lapses, that technical means are suddenly portrayed as subjects or that political subjects are anonymized by a technoidal vocabulary. The master of such hypostatization is without a doubt Günther Anders. For Sommer too it is “*the nuclear bomb*”, which “threatens [...] us” (p. 295 - , my emphasis).

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom. Lectures 1964-1965*, Cambridge/Malden, p. 8.

¹⁹ See Alvin Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust*, Bloomington 2011.

²⁰ Regardless of the execution of this threat into murderous practice, for the rest of the Jewry the threat persists and in threatening the existence of Israel a second Holocaust announces itself. This is a crucial aspect of the Post-Auschwitz-Situation which even critical theorists like Moshe Zuckermann and others sadly ignore. For Zuckermann the lesson of Auschwitz even results in the vague demand “to oppose the systematic causing of ever more new victims.” (Moshe Zuckermann, *Kritische Theorie in Israel*, in: Ders. (Hg.), *Theodor W. Adorno. Philosoph des beschädigten Lebens*, Göttingen 2004, p. 20.) One might ask why there is even the need for a recourse to Auschwitz, and one might imagine what this means for a Jewish state when its citizens defend themselves by military means against their extermination.

intention is a critical theory which does not sacrifice 'the particular' to 'the general' – after all one of the basic themes of the *Negative Dialectic*, the topic of Sommer's book – continues in this exculpatory tradition.

VI. Not only does Sommer relativize the significance of Auschwitz by equating totally different kinds of threats and exterminations, he also confounds negative continuities of a history of domination (torture, suffering, oppression, powerlessness, alienation et cetera) with the specifics of the 'Post-Auschwitz'-Situation. He mingles 'modernity' per se with 'totalitarianism' but also suffering under oppressive conditions in premodern times and the actual "omnipresence of the catastrophe" into one.²¹ The real and the potential perpetrators whose intentions actually are the 'utmost extreme' can be pleased. Ennobled by a critical theorist they are finally allowed to say: 'We all are victims'.

To avoid misunderstandings: In the statement I have quoted as an introductory statement, Jean Améry critically refers to the question if, for example, one might also consider the National Socialist perpetrators to be victims – "products of mental mutilation"²² – as they *became* perpetrators under specific social *conditions*.²³ However, this question is not addressed by Sommer in his identification of all people as victims. Here it is much simpler: The victim status of everyone, the tormentor as well as the tormented, is explained by the nuclear threat. Besides, even if one labels the Nazi-perpetrators as 'victims' in the sense that according to the theory of the authoritarian personality their actions emerged as the result of living under alienated social conditions and therefore they had no absolute free choice in their leanings (I personally would not speak of 'victims' here), this 'victim' status would have to be considered as totally different, by every person who has not lost his sense of judgement, from the victim status of those tortured and murdered by these perpetrators.²⁴ With his concentration camp=nuclear threat=the utmost extreme=victims-chain of equivalence, Sommer levels precisely these crucial differences.

Translation: Paul Mentz²⁵

²¹ 'In the face of Auschwitz' the Adorno-exeget Dirk Braunstein also lapses into such a form of identity thinking in the worst possible way: "In the face of extermination war and concentration camps human history presents itself as a history of human extermination." (Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, Bielefeld 2011, p. 189) Once again 'concentration camps' become a pretext for a negative philosophy of history and at the same time the latter becomes a means to let the specifics of the Shoah disappear into an indiscriminate "human extermination".

²² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. New York/London 2007, p. 264.

²³ But this would not absolve anyone from the individual responsibility for their murderous actions, as Adorno, too, points out. (See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. New York/London 2007, p. 264)

²⁴ See Jean Améry, *Jargon der Dialektik*, Stuttgart 2004, p. 267: "When in addition the tormentors may be called victims too, then one has to precisely specify: whose victims."

²⁵ Thanks to Sina Menke for helpful comments and corrections.