

CIVILIZATION: ONGOING HOLOCAUSTS

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“The lesson of the Holocaust is the facility with which most people, put into a situation that does not contain a good choice, or renders such a good choice very costly, argue themselves away from the issue of moral duty (or fail to argue themselves towards it), adopting instead the precepts of rational interest and self-preservation. *In a system where rationality and ethics point in opposite directions, humanity is the main loser.* Evil can do its dirty work, hoping that most people most of the time will refrain from doing rash, reckless things—and resisting evil is rash and reckless. Evil needs neither enthusiastic followers nor applauding audience—the instinct of self-preservation will do, encouraged by the comforting thought that it is not my turn yet, thank God: by lying low, I can still escape.

Zygmunt Bauman

Many of us go willingly to our own deaths. In the Nazi Holocaust, in front of the gas chambers and crematoria were well-kept lawns and flower gardens. Often, as those who were about to die arrived they would hear light music, played by an orchestra of “young and pretty girls all dressed in white blouses and navy-blue skirts.” the men, women, and children were told to undress, so they could be given showers. They were told, most often pleasantly, to move into the room where they would soon die. As Zygmunt Bauman observes, “rational people will go quietly, meekly, joyously into the gas chamber, if only they are allowed to believe it is a bathroom.”

Once the doors were locked behind them, a sergeant would give the order to drop the crystals: “All right, give ‘em something to chew on.” Soon, but too late, the people would realize that they had signed their final false contract, and at last they would fight for their lives, stampeding toward the doors that were sealed behind them, where “they piled up in one blue clammy blood-splattered pyramid, clawing and mauling each other

even in death.”³⁵⁰

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The endpoint of civilization is assembly-line mass murder. The assembly-line mass murder of the Nazi Holocaust is production stripped of the veneer of economics. It is the very essence of production. It took the living and converted them to the dead. That’s what this culture does. It was efficient, it was calculable, it was predictable, and it was controlled through nonhuman technologies. And it was also, as well as being grossly immoral, incredibly stupid. Even from the perspective of pure acquisitiveness and land-hunger, it was self-defeating. As German troops froze and starved on the Eastern Front, valuable railroad cars were used instead to move cargoes that fed crematoria. The Nazis performed economic analyses showing that feeding slaves just a bit more increased their productivity more than enough to offset the extra cost of feed. Yet they were starved. Similarly, slaughtering Russians were foolish. Many Ukrainians and Russians greeted the Wehrmacht with kisses, open arms, and flowers, happy to be out from under the tyranny of Stalinism. The Germans quickly began murdering noncombatants to make room for the Germans who would move in after the war, or because they were told to, or because the Russians were inferior, or for any of the reasons given for these slaughtering since the beginning of civilization’s wars of extermination. And so Russian noncombatants fought back. They blew up trains, they killed German officers, they picked off individual soldiers. They hurt the Germans. For all their vaunted rationality, the Germans weren’t so very rational, were they?

Of course we’re different now. We have rational reasons for the killings. There’s no silly talk of master races and *lebensraum*. Instead, the economy is run along strictly rationalist lines. If something makes money, we do it, and if it doesn’t, we don’t (ignore for a moment that to divorce economics from morals and humanity is as evil as it is to do the same for science). But the United States economy costs at least five times as much as it’s worth. Total annual U.S. corporate profits are about \$500 billion, while the *direct* costs of the activities from which these profits derive are more than \$2.5 trillion.³⁵¹ These

include \$51 billion in direct subsidies and \$53 billion in tax breaks, \$274.7 billion lost because of deaths from workplace cancer, \$225.9 billion lost because of the health costs of stationary source air pollution, and so on.³⁵² This is to speak only of calculable costs, since other values—such as a living planet—do not, because they're not calculable, exist. The fact remains, however, that it is manifestly stupid to destroy your landbase, regardless of the abstract financial reward or esteem you may gain. Yet this culture spends more to build and maintain commercial fishing vessels than the fiscal value of the fish caught. The same is true for the destruction of forests. In the United States the Forest Service loses in a not atypical year \$400 million dollars on its timber sale program, or about seven hundred and seventy-nine dollars per acre deforested.

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Hitler was ahead of his time. Social conditions weren't yet ripe for a government to fully realize the elimination of diversity toward which he aimed. Simply put, his—or any other—corporate-governmental state had not yet achieved the sort of power necessary to enslave and maintain that purity of control. This is true for power relative to other corporate states, it's true for power relative to human beings, and it's true for power relative to the natural world.

So far as the former goes, we need to remember that Hitler wasn't defeated by Jews or members of resistance organizations; he was defeated by other imperial powers, the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States. Had the Wehrmacht not foundered on the Russian winter and been repulsed by Russian troops, our stories of the time after Dachau would have read much differently. And certainly these other powers didn't stop the Nazis because of that nation's mistreatment of Jews, Romani, and so on. Indeed, each has its own august tradition of similarly unabated ruthlessness. At base, these nations stopped the German government because they didn't want it to control resources they themselves controlled or coveted.

So far as the second, control over people, imagine if Hitler had been able to broadcast his message twenty-four hours per day into peoples' homes, and if people had

willingly tuned in to these broadcasts hour after hour, day after day. Imagine the effectiveness of his propaganda if teleplays could have insinuated his form of casting and fate into the lives of his subject from infancy to senescence. I think we do ourselves a disservice if we look at old clips of Hitler strutting, yelling, and gesticulating, and wonder how the hell anyone came under his spell. First, consider who chose those clips: the victors, who as always have an interest in making their enemies look ludicrous. But more importantly, that wasn't even the Nazis' main form of propaganda. Joseph Goebbels, party propaganda chief for the National Socialists, was clear that rather than having the media inculcate people with heavy-handed political messages, it was much better to give them lots of light entertainment. Goebbels also believe that propaganda worked best when it put forth the illusion of diversity, but had a numbing sameness—a purity—to the underlying ideological message.³⁵³

For those whom light entertainment failed to convince, technology was also not sufficiently advanced to allow such strict governmental control of individuals as Hitler would perhaps have liked. Sure, his state police force was reasonably efficient for its day, but not only did the Nazis have no satellite surveillance systems, they didn't even have satellites. And the forensic sciences were in their early stages. It would not have been possible to track, identify, or apprehend antisocial individuals through computer-matching of fingerprints or facial scans. I'm sure by now you've heard that every person who attended the 2001 Super Bowl had her or his face surreptitiously scanned; these images were cross-checked with computer images, to identify lawbreakers. And now Sacramento's airport has begun scanning the face of every passenger. Hitler had no worldwide network of computers (named *Echelon* or not) capable of intercepting three billion phone or email (*What's email? I can hear Adolf ask*) messages per day, sifting through approximately 90 percent of all transmissions. Hitler not only did not have what we would consider computers, but he also did not have the capacity to capture computer signals such as keystrokes or images from monitors through walls or from other buildings. He did not have the capacity to point special types of cameras at people and perform strip searches, or even body cavity searches. Amateur that he was, Hitler did not even have a national system of social security numbers, which, in the words of United

States Secretary of State Colin Powell, “allows us to monitor, track down and capture an American citizen.”³⁵⁴ None of this he had. Scientists used such unreliable means as phrenology to identify potential miscreants, having no knowledge of the human genome. And Hitler would not even have recognized the word *genotype*, much less been able to create genetically altered diseases to target specific races. He would have had no idea what an RFID chip is.

So far as the third, Hitler did not have the capacity to irradiate the planet, nor to poison it (organ chloride pesticides and herbicides came into common usage after World War II (and in fact were in many ways by-products of the gas warfare programs of World War I; prior to that *every* farmer was organic.) He didn’t have the capacity to change the planet’s climate. He did not have at his disposal a standing army designed to fight two major wars in disparate parts of the globe at the same time. The Wehrmacht couldn’t even handle two *fronts*. The economy had not become so integrated, so *rationalized*—in other words, it had not lost so much of its diversity—as to be under the control of so few people who could kill millions of human beings—hell, who could kill the whole planet—by the merest extension of economic pressure.

In his analysis of the social effects of information technologies, Joseph Weizenbaum wrote, “Germany implemented the ‘final solution’ of its ‘Jewish Problem’ as a textbook exercise in instrumental reasoning, Humanity briefly shuddered when it could no longer avert its gaze from what had happened, when the photographs taken by the killers themselves began to circulate, and when the pitiful survivors re-emerged into the light. But in the end it made no difference. The same logic, the same cold and ruthless application of calculating reason, slaughtered at least as many people during the next twenty years as had fallen victim to the technicians of the thousand-year Reich. We have learned nothing.”³⁵⁵

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Unless it is stopped, the dominant culture will kill everything on the planet, or at least everything it can.

Each holocaust is unique. The destruction of the European Jewry did not look like the destruction of the American Indians. It could not, because the technologies involved were not the same, the targets were not the same, and the perpetrators were not the same. They shared motivation and certain aspects of their socialization, to be sure, but they were not the same. Similarly, the slaughter of Armenians (and Kurds) by Turks did not (and does not) look like the slaughter of Vietnamese by Americans. And just as similarly, the holocausts of the twenty-first century will not and do not already look like the great holocausts of the twentieth. They cannot, because this society has progressed.

And every holocaust looks different depending on the class to which the observer belongs. The Holocaust looked far different to high ranking Nazi officials and to executives of large corporations—both of whose primary social concerns would have been how to maximize production and control, that is, how to most effectively exploit human and nonhuman resources—than it did to good Germans, whose primary concerns were as varied as the people themselves but probably included doing their own jobs—immoral as those jobs may have been from an outside perspective—as well as possible; may have included feelings of relief that those in power were finally doing something about the “Jewish Problem”; and certainly included doing whatever they could to not notice the greasy smoke from the crematoria (constructed with the best materials and faultless workmanship). The Holocaust then also looked different to good Germans than it did to those who resisted, whose main concerns may have been how to bring down the system. And it looked different to those who resisted than it did to those were considered *untermenschen*, whose main concerns may have been staying alive, or failing that, dying with humanity.

Manifest Destiny looked different to Indians than it did to JP Morgan. American slavery looked different to slaves than it did to those whose comforts and elegancies were based on slavery, and than it did to those for whom free black labor drove down their wages.

What will the great holocausts of the twenty-first century look like? It depends on where you stand. Look around.

If you're in group one, one of those in power, your postmodern holocausts will be

most barely visible, and at least a price you're willing to pay, as Madam Albright said about killing Iraqi children. The holocausts will probably share similarities with other holocausts, as you attempt to maximize production—to “grow the economy,” as you might say—and as, when necessary, you attempt to eradicate dissent. This means the holocaust will look like a booming economy beset by shifting problems that somehow always keep you from ever reaching the Promised Land, whatever that might be. The holocaust will look like numbers on ledgers. It will look like technical problems to be solved, whether those problems are increasing your access to necessary resources, dealing with global warming, calming unrest on the streets, or figuring out what to do about too many unproductive people on land you know you could put to better use. The holocaust will look like houses with gates, limousines with bullet-proof glass, and a military budget that can never stop increasing.

The holocaust will feel like economics. It will feel like progress. It will feel like technological innovation. It will feel like civilization. It will feel like the way things are.

If you're in the second group, the good Germans, you will continue to be co-opted into supporting the system that does not serve you well. Perhaps the holocaust will look like a new car. Perhaps it will look like lending your talents to a major corporation—or more broadly toward economic production—so you can make a better life for your children. Perhaps it will look like working as an engineer for Shell or on an assembly line for General Motors. Maybe it will look like basing a person's value on her or his employability or productivity. Perhaps it will look like anger at Mexicans or Pakistanis or Algerians or Hmong who compete with you for jobs. Perhaps it will look like outrage at environmentalists who want to save some damn suckerfish, even (or especially) if it impinges on your property rights, or if it takes water you need to irrigate, to make the desert bloom, to make the desert productive. Maybe it will feel like continuing to do a job that you hate—and that requires so little of your humanity—because no matter how you try, you never can seem to catch up. Maybe it will feel like being tired at the end of the day, and just wanting to sit and watch some television.

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An article in today's *Ottawa Citizen* under the headline: "Science turns monkeys into drones—Humans are next, genetic experts say." The article read, "Scientists have discovered a way of manipulating a gene that turns animals into drones that [*sic*] do not become bored with repetitive tasks. The experiments, conducted on monkeys, are the first to demonstrate that animal behaviour can be permanently changed, turning the subjects from aggressive to 'compliant' creatures.

"The genes are identical in humans and although the discovery could help to treat depression and other types of mental illness, it will raise images of the Epsilon caste from Aldous Huxley's futuristic novel *Brave New World*.

"The experiments—detailed in the journal *Nature Neuroscience* this month—involved blocking the effect of a gene called D2 in a particular part of the brain. This cut off the link between the rhesus monkeys' motivation and reward.

"Instead of speeding up with the approach of a deadline or the prospect of a 'treat,' the monkeys in the experiment could be made to work just as enthusiastically for long periods. The scientists say the identical technique would apply to humans.

"Most people are motivated to work hard and well only by the expectation of reward, whether it's a paycheque or a word of praise," said Barry Richmond, a government neurobiologist at the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, who led the project. "We found we could remove that link and create a situation where repetitive, hard work would continue without any reward."

"The experiments involved getting rhesus monkeys to operate levers in response to colour changes on screens in front of them. Normally they work hardest and fastest with the fewest mistakes if they think a reward for the 'work' is imminent.

"However, Mr. Richmond's team found that they could make the monkeys work their hardest and fastest all the time, without any complaint or sign of slacking, just by manipulating D2 so that they forgot about the expectation of reward.

"The original purpose [*sic*] of the research was to find ways of treating mental illness, but the technicalities of permanently altering human behaviour by gene manipulation are currently too complex, he said. However, he and other scientists

acknowledge that methods of manipulating human physical and psychological traits are just around the corner, and the technology will emerge first as a lucrative add-on available from in vitro fertilization clinics.

“‘There’s no doubt we will be able to influence behaviour,’ said Julian Savulescu, a professor of ethics at Oxford University. ‘Genetically manipulating people to become slaves is not in their interests, but there are other changes that might be. We have to make choices about what makes a good life for an individual.’

“In a presentation at a Royal Society meeting titled *Designing Babies: What the Future Holds*, Yuri Verlinsky, a scientist from the University of Chicago who is at the forefront of embryo manipulation, said: ‘As infertility customers are investing so much time, money and effort into having a baby, shouldn’t they have a healthy one and what is to stop them picking a baby for its physical and psychological traits?’

“Gregory Stock, author of *Redesigning Humans* and an ethics specialist from the University of California, agrees. ‘I don’t think these kinds of interventions are exactly around the corner, they are a few years away, but I don’t think they are going to be stopped by legislation,’ he said.³⁵⁶

Remind me again, what are we waiting for? Why are we not bringing down civilization now?

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If you’re in the subsection of the third group who might some day resist but don’t know where to put your rage, the holocaust might look like armed robbery, auto theft, assault. It might look like joining a gang. It might look like needle tracks down the insides of your arms, and might smell like the bitter, vinegary stench of tar heroin. Or maybe it smells minty strong, like menthol, like the sweet smell of crack brought into your neighborhood at the behest of the CIA. Or maybe not. Maybe it’s the unmistakable smell of the inside of a cop car, and a vision through that backseat window of a little girl eating an ice cream cone, with the knowledge that never in your life will you see this sight again. Maybe it looks like Pelican Bay, or Marion, or San Quentin, or Leavenworth. Or maybe it feels like

a bullet in the back of the head, and leaves you lying on the streets of New York City, Cincinnati, Seattle, Oakland, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Baltimore, Washington.

If you're a member of the subsection of group three already working against the centralization of power, against the system, then maybe from your perspective the holocaust looks like rows of black-clad armored policemen, and it smells like teargas. Maybe it looks like lobbying a congress you know has never served you. Maybe it looks like the destruction of place after wild place, and feels like an impotence sharp as a broken leg. Maybe it looks like staring down the barrel of an American-made gun in the hands of a Colombian man wearing American-made camo fatigues, and knowing that your life is over.

For those in the fourth class, the simply extra, maybe it looks like the view from just outside the chainlink fence surrounding a chemical refinery, and maybe it smells like Cancer Alley. Maybe it looks like children with leukemia, children with cancer of the spine, children with birth defects. Maybe it feels like the grinding ache of hunger that has been your closest companion since you were born. Maybe it looks like the death of your daughter from starvation, and the death of your son from diphtheria, measles, or chicken pox. Maybe it feels like death from dehydration, when a tablet costing less than a penny could have saved you life. Or maybe it feels like nothing. Maybe it sounds like nothing, looks like nothing: what does it feel like to be struck by a missile in the middle of the night, a missile traveling faster than the speed of sound, a missile launched a thousand miles away?

Maybe it feels like salmon battering themselves against dams, monkeys locked in steel cages, polar bears starving on a dwindling ice cap, hogs confined in crates so small they cannot stand, trees falling to the chainsaw, rivers poisoned, whales deafened by sonic blasts from Navy experiments. Maybe it feels like the crack of tibia under the unforgiving jaws of a leghold trap.

Maybe it looks like the destruction of the planet's life support systems. Maybe it looks like the final conversion of the living to the dead.

As much as I cannot help but see the similarities between prisons and concentration camps, it seems to me a grave error to count on Zyklon-B-dispensing

showers to mark the new holocaust. Perhaps the new holocaust is dioxin in polar bear fat, metam sodium in the Smith River. Perhaps it comes in the form of decreasing numbers of corporations controlling increasing portions of our food supply, until, as now, three huge corporations control more than 80 percent of the beef market, and seven corporations control more than 90 percent of the grain market. Perhaps it comes in the form of these corporations, and the governments which provide the muscle for them, deciding who eats and who does not. Perhaps it comes in the form of so much starvation that we cannot count the dead. Perhaps it comes in the form of all of these, and in many others I could not name even if I were able to predict.

But this I know. The pattern has been increasing efficiency in the destruction, and increasing abstraction. Andrew Jackson himself took the “sculps” of the Indians he murdered. Heinrich Himmler nearly fainted when a hundred Jews were shot in front of him, which was surely one reason for the increased use of gas. Now, of course, it can all be done by economics.

And this I know, too. No matter what form it takes, most of us will not notice it. Those who notice will pay too little attention. It does not matter how great the cost to others nor even to ourselves, we will soldier on. We will, ourselves, walk quietly, meekly, into whatever form the gas chambers take, if only we are allowed to believe they are bathrooms.