

# AUSCHWITZ AND THE REMAINS OF THEORY: TOWARD AN ETHICS OF THE BORDERLAND

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As the questions posed by this journal indicate, the idea of theory trouble is easily conflated with a narrative of decline: "What is left of theory? Has theory lost its relevancy and critical edge? Has it lost the self-identity that it once had?" The account of what is feared lost delineates (by negation) a nostalgic image of theory's past: relevance, a critical edge, and self-identity. When those things are gone and that golden age is over we are left with ruins and remainders, as other recent titles on the state of theory, which the journal's questions self-consciously echo, make all too clear: *What's Left of Theory?* (Butler, Guillory, and Thomas); *In Near Ruins* (Dirks); *The University in Ruins* (Readings).

This essay too will relate the notion of "theory trouble" to conceptions of remnants and remainders, but it will do so without a narrative of decline. Consider, rather, how images of ruins and remains appear also in another theoretical text from the past couple of years: Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* (the original Italian title could be rendered more precisely as "What remains of Auschwitz"). Here the question of what is left has a rather different valence. Agamben does not concern himself with, say, a decline in the interest in or sense of relevance of Auschwitz, but with a task that he believes has barely started: thinking the ethical implications of the events of the Holocaust.

[T]he problem of the historical, material, technical, bureaucratic, and legal circumstances in which the extermination of the Jews took place has been sufficiently clarified . . . . The same cannot be said for the ethical and political significance of the extermination, or even for a human understanding of what happened there—that is, for its contemporary relevance. (Agamben 1999, 11)

To ask what remains of Auschwitz is to try to understand what happened there and what it means for us now. These questions are also central to what is perhaps Agamben's best known book, *Homo Sacer*:

Today politics knows no value (and consequently, no nonvalue) other than life, and until the contradictions that this fact implies are dissolved, Nazism and fascism—which transformed the decision on bare life into the supreme political principle—will remain stubbornly with us. (1998, 10)

Here again, to ask what remains of Nazism and fascism is to draw attention not to forgetting or decline but to the increasing urgency of understanding the legacy of a past that, even as it recedes, continues to make itself felt in the present. If in reflections on the condition of theory the ruin and remnant are meant to evoke loss, in relation to Auschwitz, the *ne plus ultra* of human loss, the discourse of the remnant becomes a way of reasserting the extent to which the legacy of Auschwitz continues to haunt and even structure contemporary life. If there is "theory trouble" in Agamben's work, it does not emerge from concern about the continued vitality or embattled institutional status of theory itself, but from the sense that theory is and should remain troubled by events with which it has yet to, and desperately needs to come to terms in order to understand and critique the contemporary ethical and political dispensation.

It is this sense of theory trouble that the following explores. The essay takes up both the question of how theory is troubled by the Holocaust and of how theory can trouble received ideas about the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> Important in this context is the idea that the events of the Holocaust present something like a constitutive limit to theory: the sort of theory trouble that won't go away. Our position is not that only the Nazi genocide creates this kind of theory trouble; on the contrary, we would place our argument alongside other works, such as Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, that read modernity from below and against the grain.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, we would argue that attempts to grapple with historical trauma must not subordinate specificity to a generalized understanding of modernity as catastrophe. Recognition of the particular challenges posed by distinct histories, such as the Holocaust and Atlantic slavery, can coexist with a broad understanding of the possibilities and dangers of the modern world. Our focus in this essay on the recent writings of Agamben is inspired both by the prominence

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<sup>1</sup>In order to facilitate further discussion of these issues, we have recently edited the first comprehensive anthology of theoretical writings on the Holocaust. See Levi and Rothberg (2003).

<sup>2</sup>Also relevant in this regard is Gilroy's more recent *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000).



the Italian philosopher's work has recently attained in the Anglo-American academy and by the ambitiousness of his project, which seeks to place Auschwitz at the center of modern thought and politics. Through a reading of Agamben in relationship to philosophical discourses of the limit, we seek to open up a new way of thinking theory and the Holocaust together. In particular we attend to the way that Agamben uses the writings of Primo Levi in order to establish the figure of the *Muselmann* as the absent ground of a new ethical dispensation. Against Agamben, we reread Levi as offering an ethics of the "borderland," that is, a world in which extreme violence and everyday commerce coexist without fully collapsing into each other.

When Agamben protests that we still lack a human understanding of what happened at Auschwitz, he is not claiming that no one has attempted such a thing, but that what took place there has proven especially resistant to such understanding. Of course, few interesting problems are solved within fifty years of their being posed. Yet terms such as "unthinkable" and "unimaginable" have adhered to the events of the Holocaust as to no others—indeed, these terms have become Holocaust clichés, as likely to block reflection as to encourage it. If the notion of the Holocaust presenting a limit to theorization is to have any meaning, it will therefore require some elaboration.

The philosophical tradition offers two distinct ways to comprehend the limits of thought that are pertinent in this context. The antinomies of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* are meant to show where thought inevitably falls into contradiction because it exceeds its own limits, limits that thought therefore cannot and must not go beyond: thus for Kant we can know things as they appear to us (phenomena), but cannot know things in themselves (noumena). Yet for thinkers such as Hegel, and in a different register, Wittgenstein, to conceive of a limit to thought is already to think beyond that limit. Thus Hegel, in his *Encyclopaedia*, criticizes Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*:

It argues an utter want of consistency to say, on the one hand, that understanding only knows phenomena, and, on the other, assert the absolute character of this knowledge, by statements such as 'Cognition can go no further' . . . . No one knows, or even feels, that anything is a limit or a defect until he is at the same time above and beyond it. (Hegel 1975, 60:91; cited in Priest 114)

Similarly, in the *Science of Logic* Hegel looks askance of anyone who asserts of a limitation of thought or reason "that the limitation *cannot* be transcended. To make such an assertion is to be unaware that the very



fact that something is determined as a limitation implies that the limitation is already transcended" (Hegel 1969, 134; cited in Priest 256). Writing in the early nineteenth century, Hegel points to a certain lack of awareness of self-contradiction on the part of those who describe the limits of thought. The dominant theoretical discourses of the twentieth century have been far more self-conscious about the nature of such paradoxes and the obstacles they present to understanding; indeed, historically, such discourses have often emerged in response to and as critiques of Hegel's system. Still, Hegel's claim is also echoed in the early twentieth century by Wittgenstein, who says that "to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable" (Wittgenstein 1961, 3; cited in Priest 256).

At the very least, Hegel and Wittgenstein serve to caution against the potential for self-contradiction lurking in appeals to the unthinkable. They force us to subject to close scrutiny any claims to have located the borders of what can be comprehended. Yet Kant continues to exert an appeal, perhaps because the transcendence of the limit of thought in models such as Hegel's and Wittgenstein's can appear merely formal, more a matter of the semantic implications of being able to say, "here is the limit," than of being able to take the content of any particular thought further in some ascertainable direction. Being able to see the Promised Land is no guarantee of entry, and being able to see a problem is not the same as being able to solve it.

It also seems worth noting that both Hegel's and Wittgenstein's accounts of the transcendence of the limits make thoughts occupy space. Hegel's thinker goes "above and beyond" in order to determine his limit; Wittgenstein's cannot conceive of a limit that has only one side (another limit to thought?). Such articulations of the limits of thought bring us up against—how else to say it?—the limits of a certain application of the limit metaphor: the limit of thought as a limit in space. To talk about the object of thought is to spatialize: it is, as Nietzsche might have put it, to allow grammar to do the thinking. The grammatical object is conceived of as an object that is analogous to objects in space. What happens, however, when the limit thought encounters is not the limit of a bounded object in space, but rather, say, the problem of comprehending the motives of a perpetrator of unprecedented crimes against humanity or the suffering of a victim of these crimes? What of coming to terms with a "concentrationary universe" in which the incommensurable and asymmetrical positions of perpetrator and victim confront each other?

What, in short, are the implications of philosophical ideas about the limits of thought for the discourse of unthinkability in Holocaust theory? When is this discourse best understood as self-contradictory, and when does it occupy that fraught, perhaps necessarily antinomic space where a certain limit to comprehension has been recognized and reflected



upon but cannot be grasped or transcended? Might such a space or moment be the site of theory's constitutive trouble? The following examination of Agamben's work will explore both possibilities.

Central to Agamben's reflections on the Holocaust is the figure known as the *Muselmann*. The *Muselmann*, according to Primo Levi, whose reflections on this figure in *The Drowned and the Saved* serve as Agamben's point of departure, is the exhausted, malnourished concentration camp inmate no longer capable of thought or self-preserving action—and thus not considered by fellow inmates as either quite alive or even quite human. (The name, whose origins are contested, is the German word for Muslim.) Agamben regards the *Muselmann* as “an absolutely new phenomenon” (1999, 51), reflection upon whose status is the precondition for a satisfactory post-Holocaust ethics. Thus Agamben begins by making in a very general way the basic move of transcendence. He points out that others have avoided the “sight” of the *Muselmann* and have thereby offered restricted accounts of post-Holocaust ethics, for which the *Muselmann* is the “limit,” and he implicitly asserts that in daring to make the *Muselmann* visible, his own work will transcend those limits and expand the scope of ethics.

Agamben repeatedly describes the *Muselmann* as a limit figure in other contexts too: the *Muselmann* occupies the boundaries between life and death, the human and the inhuman, and exists beyond the limits of an ethics of dignity and self-respect. There are moments in these reflections when Agamben seems to suggest that the camps teach us the limits of everyday ethical concepts in the non-transcendent sense we have suggested might be essential to Holocaust theory. For example, according to Agamben, the *Muselmann* occupies “a zone of the human where not only help but also dignity and self-respect have become useless” (1999, 63). Agamben rightly states that to criticize the *Muselmann* for his loss of dignity and self-respect, as Bruno Bettelheim did, is to make oneself complicit with the violence of the SS. From this line of argument one might infer that even though dignity and self-respect can be a vital part of certain moral and political struggles outside the extreme situation of the camps, the *Muselmann* reminds us that the realm of their operation is ultimately limited. This kind of inference would point to a recognizable but non-transcendable limit of these concepts: one knows that there are realms in which these concepts become inoperative, but that does not mean we should stop using them so much as that we should use them with a new modesty about their range and applicability.

Yet such claims do not appear to sit well with Agamben: “if there is a zone of the human in which these concepts make no sense, then they

are not genuine ethical concepts, for no ethics can claim to exclude a part of humanity, no matter how unpleasant or difficult that humanity is to see" (1999, 64). Having failed the "test" of Auschwitz, dignity and self-respect are dismissed from the realm of ethics as such. For Agamben, thinking the *Muselmann* means thinking beyond a certain limited conception of what constitutes "the human," and thereby expanding the boundaries of that conception. The *Muselmann* here is an object of thought, a limit figure that troubles received theories. This trouble can be overcome, and that overcoming leads to conceptual change, and to a revised understanding of the meaning of human being, or at least gestures towards it.

Yet there does seem to be a point at which Agamben's reflections propose seeing in the *Muselmann* a kind of limit that resists such forms of conceptual transcendence. That limit is encountered in testimony. For Agamben, testimony is what remains of Auschwitz, as indicated by his opening epigraphs (extracts from the Bible in which the survivors of catastrophes are called "remnants") and by his decision to present his attempt to articulate an ethics adequate to the challenge of Auschwitz in the form of a commentary on the works of Primo Levi, whom he describes as "a perfect example of the witness" (1999, 16).

To be a perfect example of the witness, however, is not to be a perfect witness. On Levi's own account, his status as a witness is complicated by the very fact of his survival. This survival, he says, makes his testimony constitutively incomplete, the account of an unrepresentative exception: "we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses" (P. Levi 83). Rather, in Agamben's paraphrase, "the Muslims, the submerged, [are] the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception" (1999, 33). Not only does one need to survive the camps to bear witness to them (Levi assumes that the *Muselmann* does not survive), but the *Muselmann* is in a condition where he can no longer observe, can no longer express himself.

From these ideas Agamben extracts what he calls "Levi's paradox," which takes the form, "The *Muselmann* is the complete witness" (1999, 82). Agamben glosses "Levi's paradox" in formulations such as, "[w]hoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name [that of the *Muselmänner* and the murdered] knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness" (1999, 34). This paradox is central to Agamben's project of comprehending "the ethical and political significance of the extermination." Having introduced the notion of "Levi's paradox," Agamben continues,



“understanding Auschwitz—if such a thing is possible—will coincide with understanding the sense and nonsense of this paradox” (1999, 82).<sup>3</sup>

Both Agamben and Levi identify the *Muselmann* as the site of absolute knowledge of the camps. According to Levi’s paradox, we can know where that knowledge is meant to reside, but knowing the location of that knowledge does not give us access to it. Bearing witness is possible insofar as Levi and countless others have borne witness, impossible insofar as that which is borne witness to is both that for which there are no words and that which cannot possibly be spoken of (the experience of the inside of the machinery of death).

To accept Levi’s paradox is to accept a specific non-transcendable limit to our comprehension of the Holocaust. Whereas the *figure* of the *Muselmann* represents the previously unthought, the *content* of the *Muselmann’s* testimony, on this account, is constitutively unthinkable for non-*Muselmänner* (and perhaps even for the *Muselmänner* themselves). For to recognize and articulate these limits to testimony is not to transcend or sublate them. To describe the *Muselmann* or the drowned as the complete witness is not to gain access to that witness’s testimony, but to be compelled to acknowledge the limitations of the testimony we do have. Recognizing this kind of limit does not allow for that limit’s recuperation or transcendence: the boundaries of testimony remain what they were, and we become more acutely aware of what we do not know and what we cannot think. It therefore represents a site of persistent, even constitutive trouble for any attempt to theorize the experience of the camps.

Levi’s paradox articulates something important about the relationship of theory and the Holocaust. It makes clear both the gap and the necessary relationship between certain forms of experience of the camps and the way such experiences are conceptualized. It imposes, as we suggested earlier, a certain modesty about the kinds of claims that can be made about the camps—not only by those who were not there, but also by those, like Levi, who were and who survived. It is also inarguable that taking the *Muselmann* into account is an important element in considering the ethical and political significance of the camps, and that Agamben makes a contribution to the discussion of ethics after Auschwitz by focusing on that figure.

At the same time, Agamben’s formulations strike us as problematic and inadequate in several respects. First, by restructuring the “zone of the human” to conform to the condition of the *Muselmann*, Agamben removes the figure of the *Muselmann* from the context—the camps—in which he or she is “produced.” The *Muselmann* becomes an isolated

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<sup>3</sup>This “paradox” is, incidentally, empirically problematic. Agamben closes his book with the apparently impossible testimonies of former *Muselmänner*. He defensively asserts that the existence of such testimony, “not only does not contradict Levi’s paradox but, rather, fully verifies it” (1999, 165). Why that is, however, he does not explain.



figure floating, like a Giacometti sculpture, in an otherwise apparently empty abstract space that Agamben calls “humanity.” The *Muselmann* is meant to bear a certain truth about the nature of ethics “after Auschwitz,” but is it not important when trying to articulate such an ethics to reflect on what Auschwitz was?<sup>4</sup> Surely such an account should attend to the historical, legal, and political conditions that led to the development of the camp system, including the kinds of features that Zygmunt Bauman focuses on in *Modernity and the Holocaust*—such as a massive, morally indifferent bureaucratic apparatus that dehumanized its “objects” and distanced its agents from a sense of responsibility for their actions, as well as the obsessive hatred of the Jews that Saul Friedländer has recently dubbed “redemptive antisemitism.”<sup>5</sup> If the *Muselmann* would not have existed without these factors, shouldn’t an ethics focused upon this figure also take account of them?

Interestingly enough, in *Homo Sacer* Agamben himself argues that “the camp” is the “nomos” (definitive political element) of the modern. In remarking that “[w]hat happened in the camps so exceeds the juridical concept of crime that the specific juridico-political structure in which those events took place is often simply omitted from consideration” (1998, 166), Agamben could be preparing a critique of what is omitted from *Remnants of Auschwitz*. *Homo Sacer* argues that the camp is the space where the state of exception becomes normal and where “whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and ethical sense of the police who temporarily act as sovereign” (1998, 174).

This line of argument produces an antinomy in the Agamben oeuvre: for the Agamben of *Homo Sacer* a camp is a camp if anything is possible within it, no matter whether or not it actually produces *Muselmänner* and corpses, while for the Agamben of *Remnants of Auschwitz* the important fact about the *Muselmann* is simply that such a figure happened, not where and how he became possible. What links the positions of his two works is a level of abstraction that deliberately brackets features of each paradigm ordinarily understood as essential: for the camp, figures such as the *Muselmann*; for the *Muselmann*, the conditions of the camp. Both moves permit Agamben to dismantle the boundary between the Nazi camps and the modern world. We have already seen this in relation to the *Muselmann*, in the wake of whose existence all previously existing moral concepts must be revised. It can be seen also in the examples of modern camps Agamben offers,

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<sup>4</sup>In a fine essay on the question of culpability in recent approaches to the Holocaust, Debarati Sanyal offers a parallel critique focusing not on the *Muselmann* but rather on Agamben’s interpretation of Levi’s concept of “the gray zone”; see Sanyal (2002). We have also benefited from incisive critical essays on Agamben by Dominick LaCapra and Geoffrey Hartman; see LaCapra (2003) and Hartman (2002, 85–99).

<sup>5</sup>See chapter 4 in Bauman (1989) and chapter 3 in Friedländer (1997).



including, “[t]he soccer stadium in Bari into which the Italian police in 1991 provisionally herded all illegal Albanian immigrants,” the *zones d’attentes* in French international airports where foreigners requesting refugee status are held, and even, he suggests in an earlier version of the essay, gated communities in the USA (1998, 174).<sup>6</sup> At such moments Agamben seems to be suggesting that Auschwitz is potentially everywhere, a suggestion that ends up eliding the specific challenges posed both by the *Muselmann* and the camp system.

We would also identify a second problem with Agamben’s approach: the grounds for Agamben’s selection of the *Muselmann* as the “complete witness” are not clear. Ethics after Auschwitz must take account of the *Muselmann*, but that does not justify transforming him into a fetish, the sole site of the truth of the camps. If Levi’s own testimony is on his own account unrepresentative, that surely does not mean that it has no truth content. The fact that Levi himself distrusts the testimony of, say, former members of the *Sonderkommando* (the camp inmates who were forced, under threat of death, to operate the crematoria) is no reason to disqualify such testimony out of hand. The power of Claude Lanzmann’s astonishing film *Shoah* derives in no small part from the testimony of a former “crematorium raven” (P. Levi 60). Despite his attempt to develop a complex theory of testimony premised on the relationship between the *Muselmann* and the surviving witness, Agamben ultimately homogenizes the site of witness by polarizing those positions. While there is warrant for such a reading in Levi’s texts (e.g., Levi’s notion of “the drowned and the saved”), those texts also include the hypothesis of “the gray zone,” a zone of ethical uncertainty in which figures such as the *Sonderkommando* are paradigmatic. In fact, testimony from the gray zone may prove as illuminating about the ethical challenges of the Nazi genocide as that derived from an understanding of Levi’s paradox. Despite the serious reservations expressed by Levi about the testimonies of figures who were forced into the most terrible complicity with the Nazis, such testimonies have been shown to be of great value in understanding the Nazi genocide, and, indeed, in making clear the need for theoretical innovation in order to do so.<sup>7</sup>

In what remains one of the most profound attempts to “think” the Nazi genocide, historian and social theorist Dan Diner proposes that

<sup>6</sup>For the reference to gated communities, see Agamben (2000, 42).

<sup>7</sup>In turning at this point in our argument to the concept of the gray zone we are mindful of Sanyal’s critique of how that concept has been deployed in recent theory. Sanyal correctly observes that much Holocaust theory misreads Levi’s notion as a warrant for relativizing questions of complicity and culpability. Like Sanyal we believe that the notion can still be useful for mapping specific relations in the concentrationary universe and for situating the post-Holocaust critic in “proximity” to this history without presumptuously identifying with the figures who inhabit the camps. See Sanyal (2002), especially 20-21.



Nazi action can be most effectively illuminated from the perspective of the gray zone, and particularly that of the *Judenräte*—the Jewish councils who ran the ghettos and were charged to make decisions about who would be allowed to work and who would be sent to the camps (130–137). The councils negotiated on the assumption that the Nazis were rational—specifically, that they would not want to exterminate a productive labor source while at war. The Nazis utilized this assumption to facilitate the killing process, with which the councils found themselves unsuspectingly cooperating. It is the Jewish councils' experience of participating in their own destruction while acting according to the logic of self-preservation that Diner terms the *counterrational*. And it is in reflecting on the Jewish experience of Nazi counterrationality that Diner says we encounter the limits of historical understanding. Only at this limit point, according to Diner, can we begin to "think the Nazis" via what he calls negative historical cognition. While we wouldn't want to generalize the standpoint of the *Judenräte* as the essence of the Holocaust any more than we would that of the *Muselmann*, when read alongside each other the arguments of Agamben and Diner strongly suggest the importance of multiplying the epistemological standpoints from which we approach the Nazi genocide.

Thirdly and relatedly, one wonders what it means for Agamben to assert that ethical behavior outside of the camp situation needs always and everywhere to be thought under the sign of the *Muselmann*, and that dignity and self-respect can therefore have no place in ethics. It's telling that Agamben does not provide a single example of an everyday ethical or moral situation in which remembering the *Muselmann* makes a significant difference. If a genuine ethics is one that does not exclude any aspect of humanity, no matter how difficult it is to see, then surely a genuine ethics should not exclude, say, the person who leaves a degrading relationship in order to preserve a sense of dignity and self-respect any more than it should exclude the *Muselmann*. Just as he absolutizes Auschwitz and the figure of the *Muselmann*, Agamben also absolutizes and thus normalizes the "state of exception" that might be understood as producing them.

Finally, Agamben's elaboration of the *Muselmann's* significance also contains a striking ambivalence, one that he does not explicitly theorize, although he arguably gestures towards it when he remarks that both the "sense and nonsense" of Levi's paradox must be understood. On the one hand, Agamben calls for a post-Holocaust ethics that will not avert its gaze from the *Muselmann*, and that will expand and redefine its understanding of the universally human in light of this figure. On the other hand, the point of Levi's paradox is that even if one sees the *Muselmann*, his testimony cannot be heard and remains "impossible." Nor does it seem like a category error to wonder how these ideas are to



be reconciled, for the question of testimony is intimately bound up for Agamben with the question of ethics. As we have seen, Agamben believes that Levi's paradox is crucial to understanding the "ethical and political significance of the extermination."

This ambivalence touches upon the two senses of theory trouble that we have proposed—both the trouble that the Holocaust constitutes for theory and the insight that theory can provide into mystificatory discourses on the Nazi genocide. The *Muselmann* appears as a troubling figure, too disturbing for previous thinkers to address or even "see" properly, with the result, according to Agamben, that no ethics adequate to the challenge of Auschwitz has yet been formulated; Levi's paradox, predicated on the notion of the impossible testimony of the *Muselmann*, presents us with a discourse that troubles theory more radically, forcing us to reflect on a limit to comprehension that cannot be grasped or transcended. Although many of the particular arguments and claims in Agamben's work are disputable, this structural feature of his work strikes us as significant. If earlier we asked if the non-transcendable limit might be the site of theory's constitutive trouble, here the ambivalence in Agamben's theorization of various Holocaust "limits" points to something more complex. The Holocaust troubles theory both insofar as it calls for an expansion of its understanding of everyday phenomena and insofar as it confronts understanding with moments that are not only not yet thought, but are in a strong sense unthinkable. At the same time theory also complicates pronouncements on the Holocaust by helping to foreground the ambivalence of the two different ways of thinking the limits of thought. Agamben may be perfectly aware of this dialogical relationship between theory and the Holocaust, but it is striking and perhaps telling that he does not address the issue explicitly. For him to do so would require that he bring to his description of Auschwitz and its consequences a greater sense of heterogeneity than is allowed by such gestures as making the *Muselmann* the measure of all ethics.

Ironically, one finds just such a sense of heterogeneity and complexity in the work of Agamben's perfect witness, Primo Levi. In his preface to *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi not only makes his famous claim that "the history of the Lagers [camps] has been written almost exclusively by those who, like myself, never fathomed them to the bottom" (P. Levi 17)—a claim that is the basis of Levi's paradox. He also contributes to a conceptualization of the Nazi camps that takes into account the different types of limits we have been working with and helps us rearticulate them in a new way.<sup>8</sup> Referring to David Rousset's famous notion of the "concentrationary universe," Levi writes,

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<sup>8</sup>On Levi's conceptual innovations see also Ian Buchanan (2000), chapter 3.

Especially during the last years of the war, the Lagers constituted an extensive and complex system which profoundly compenetrated the daily life of the country; one has with good reason spoken of the *univers concentrationnaire*, but it was not a closed universe. Small and large industrial companies, agricultural combines, agencies, and arms factories drew profits from the practically free labor supplied by the camps. (P. Levi 15-16)<sup>9</sup>

Levi opens the way here for a conceptualization of the concentrationary universe as *borderland*, that is, as constituted by the simultaneity or “compenetration” of radically different elements.<sup>10</sup> While the *Muselmann* and the victims of the gas chambers represent one extreme of that universe, Levi emphasizes that the camps were also in contact with the institutions and processes of daily life. In the camps, “useless violence” (another Levi concept) and counterrational genocide coexisted with an economy of violence that still functioned according to the profit motive and the imperatives of war. The camps, in other words, need to be thought in relationship to both notions of the limit, that of Kant as well as that of Hegel. The camps are both thinkable and not thinkable; thinking them both demands an expansion of the powers of thought and entails an experience of thought’s limitation.

This formulation differs subtly but significantly from the “sense and non-sense” of Agamben’s paradox. For Agamben, the *Muselmann*’s impossible witness becomes the truth of all ethical considerations; for us, ethics after Auschwitz needs to grapple precisely with the *coexistence* of that figure of extremity with the everyday logics of “combines, agencies, and arms factories.” The point is not to reduce National Socialism and the Holocaust to the dynamics of capitalism—a crude Marxist argument that has never been convincing and that has rather prevented the emergence of a genuinely post-Holocaust Marxism. Instead, the challenge lies in constructing an ethics predicated on a recognition of the compenetration of extreme, counterrational violence with a world that remained (and indeed in some ways remains) largely the same as before the Nazi “final solution.”

What can the work of Levi and others who theorize the Holocaust, or who allow their theoretical reflections to be troubled by the Holocaust, offer theory in such a situation, at such a time? The compenetration of the everyday and the extreme that Levi describes as the open universe

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<sup>9</sup>See also Rousset (1946 in French, or 1947 in English). Rousset’s vision of the camps is guided by a Marxist framework that recognizes the industrial elements of the concentrationary universe, but skirts the significance of genocide.

<sup>10</sup>The idea of the Nazi camp as “borderland” is developed at length in Rothberg (2000), chapters 3 and 4.



or borderland of Auschwitz has implications not only for post-Holocaust ethics, but also for thought in the age of theory trouble. No doubt, the supposed decline that has afflicted theory according to the recent diagnoses with which we began our essay has diverse causes. Whether the nexus of the extreme and the everyday that Auschwitz represents is one of the conditions of such theory trouble may not be empirically verifiable. At the least, however, the novelty of industrial genocide—along with other expressions of extreme, modern violence—ought to provoke a self-critical moment in modes of thought that remain, despite the developments of the last decades, dominantly European-inspired and Europe-centered.

Among the crucial issues for both Holocaust studies and theory in general that emerge from the attempt to grasp the coexistence of catastrophe and progress implicit in modernity is the question of ethical and epistemological standpoint. While the question of testimony in the face of the extreme has been at the center of work in Holocaust studies for many years, the acceleration in the global flow of images, technologies, people, and ideas during the most recent decades has made the issue more obviously relevant on a world scale.<sup>11</sup> When Primo Levi described the open borders between Nazi camps and the surrounding economies of Germany and Poland he was responding to what still remained a fundamentally local situation (if certainly one with much more general implications). Because of the postwar globalization of the media the borders between extreme violence and everyday life are now exponentially more porous. Whether the issue is famine, war, terrorism, epidemic, ethnic cleansing, or the echo of traumatic histories past, Levi's figure of the open universe conjoining and communicating between violence and commerce speaks to the needs of the present, although its implications will have to be worked out concretely for these very different forms of violence.

Earlier we criticized Hegel and Wittgenstein for allowing a restrictive spatial metaphor to determine how they imagined the limits of thought. Yet it is almost impossible completely to do without spatial metaphors when imagining forms of thought. The concept of the borderland developed here offers an alternative to the philosopher's model in which thought is a single, bounded object traversed by an individual, mobile thinker. To think the limits of the borderland is to think about how far a single thinker/observer can travel, how much she/he can see. It is to recognize how the same territory will be cognitively mapped differently from different standpoints, to see that these maps will not allow simple arithmetical combination into a single,

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<sup>11</sup>Here we are drawing on Arjun Appadurai's useful and well-known account of globalization as a series of non-isomorphic flows. See Appadurai (1996).

unified image of the space in question, but will force us to grasp concretely the implications of valuing heterogeneity and disjunction.

Because the Nazi camps are neither an aberration in nor the essence of modernity they prompt us to think about social space and social subjects in terms of a heterogeneous topology. Diner's example of the *Judenräte* helps illustrate the stakes, but also the difficulty of thinking social space and social subjects together under circumstances in which different modes of rationality collide. Significantly, Diner's argument does not rest on an equation of identity with epistemological standpoint, as in certain caricatures of identity politics and standpoint theory. Rather, for Diner, what is significant is the structural position of the Jewish councils in relationship to the Nazi destruction of rationality; one need not be a council member to grasp the implications of their terrifying situation (and being a council member does not guarantee the insight). What is important is that, while the council's position is most definitely not the "dominant" one, it represents, like the proletariat for Lukács, a position from which the truth of the system is more readily grasped. This reminder that a standpoint epistemology need not collapse into an identity politics is important in an era in which the grounds of systemic critique are being actively contested, with a minority politics of difference often unhelpfully counterposed to "universalist" and "humanist" ideologies. Of course, when we situate the *Judenräte* and the *Muselmann* within a conception of Auschwitz as borderland we also realize that even the truth grasped from their positions is necessarily limited. Yet precisely because standpoint and identity have been analytically separated, such limits need not only be mourned as "losses" of critical authority, although surely they also point towards incalculable human losses. It is only from the sites of loss and limit that we can hope to chart the asymmetrical spaces of modern violence.

We began with Agamben's inquiry into the remnants and remainders of Auschwitz as an alternative theoretical approach to the currently prevalent understanding of such motifs in discussions of the condition of theory. But if, as we have argued, Auschwitz demands to be theorized in terms of heterogeneous, disjunctive space, then the two notions of ruin that we initially distinguished may start productively to converge. Not so long ago Lyotard's diagnosis of the postmodern condition as decline in the authority of modernity's master narratives was seen as part of the rise of theory. The standpoint from which such claims were made—that of theory—is now seen to be in trouble, perhaps not least because theory itself, like the discourses of modernity that Lyotard analyzed, has become fragmented; because, that is, there is no self-evidently dominant theory or theorist as there once seemed to be. Can these fragments too be thought of, not as ruins, but as constituting a heterogeneous topography? Is it possible, in short, that



what looks to some like the decline of a once self-identical field, confident that it was relevant and occupied a cutting, critical edge, might from the standpoint of Holocaust studies be seen as a positive development? No longer so sure of its self-identity or its position on the leading edge of new thought, theory would now be understood as a field made heterogeneous by the multiplication of voices, standpoints, and objects of study, and marked by a self-critical sensitivity to the capacities and limits of theoretical discourses. The complex interactions of these differing standpoints, and the inbuilt modesty about the extension of one's theoretical claims, would, then, represent a vital and ongoing source of trouble for theory, a kind of trouble, even, that it could not do without.

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