

Violence, Representation, and the Nation

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In recent years, the social sciences and humanities have witnessed a burgeoning literature that has sought to address the relationship between questions of power, knowledge, and the politics of representation. Interdisciplinary scholarship in fields such as women's studies and postcolonial studies have examined the ways in which strategies of representation are intertwined in broader historical processes and may reproduce or disrupt relations of power based on inequalities such as gender, race, and nation. These questions have been particularly significant when raised in relation to the representation of oppression and violence against various subaltern groups.

Scholars have grappled with two simultaneous and related issues in regard to the study of violence and oppression. On the one hand, research that has been engaged in the study of questions such as ethnic, racial, religious, and gender violence has sought to understand and explain the causes of violence and examine the possibilities of resistance to such structural forms of violence. On the other hand, scholars have grappled with the ways in which such forms of violence can be studied and represented without reproducing a form of epistemic violence (Spivak 1988) against the subordinated social groups studied. In light of such debates, notions of the "real" have become increasingly implicated and unsettled through analyses pointing to ways in which the contingencies of context and social location shape the production and representation of reality in cultural texts such as film, fiction, and ethnography (Hesford and Kozol 2001). However, for scholars informed by such debates yet remaining committed to the writing of histories and ethnographies, an absolute jettison of any notion of the real has

produced its own set of problems, such as the pervasiveness of an ungrounded cultural relativism and a potential blindness to the materiality of violence and oppression.

The essays by Rachel Einwohner, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, and Jeffrey Olick taken together raise a set of issues that engage with and contribute in important ways to such questions of violence and representation that scholars have sought to address in comparative contexts. In particular, the essays provide insights that can inform two central themes in the contemporary study of violence and representation. The first theme addresses the ways in which representations of violence may be simultaneously appropriated by nation-states and disruptive of national boundaries in the context of contemporary globalization. The second theme involves the question of violence and subjectivity and the ways in which scholars have cautioned that the representation of violence may involve a form of epistemic violence against subaltern groups depicted as passive victims devoid of agency or the capacity to resist. Through an exploration of these themes, the study of the Holocaust in these essays provides insights that inform debates on the politics of representation, while simultaneously persisting with analyses of the material reality of violence and genocide.

"The Cosmopolitanization of Holocaust Memory" by Levy and Sznajder provides an important discussion of the ways in which the production of a sociocultural memory of the Holocaust is shaped by narratives of the nation-state and of globalization in the post-Holocaust period. The essay contributes to recent interdisciplinary research, which has sought to examine the ways in which public cultural representations both invoke and transcend nation-specific meanings as such representations travel across national boundaries in the context of contemporary globalization. The essay convincingly demonstrates that while meanings of the Holocaust have been contingent on specific national and historical contexts in the cases of Israel, Germany, and the United States, such meanings have also produced a global narrative in which the Holocaust has become a universal symbol of genocide. Global narratives of the Holocaust are thus interwoven with nation-specific meanings.

The essay's analysis engages with a broader debate on the nature of contemporary globalization, one that questions how cultural forms and meanings are shaped by transnational processes of deterritorialization (Appadurai 1996) and territorialized narratives of the modern nation-state. Consider, for instance, a very different context, the case of globalization in contemporary India. Recent

research has examined the ways in which meanings of "the global" themselves are often invented and deployed through local cultural and nationalist narratives. Thus the notion that global or cosmopolitan cultural narratives necessarily transcend or destabilize the territorially bound nation-state is one that is placed in question when processes of globalization are examined in specific empirical contexts (Fernandes 2000). As Levy and Sznajder point out in the case of the representation of the Holocaust, new global narratives have to be reconciled with older national narratives in distinctive ways.

The essay further suggests that this interweaving of national and global narratives in the case of the representation of the Holocaust has broader implications for scholars concerned with questions of violence, genocide, and human rights. The authors show that both national and global narratives of the Holocaust have played a central role in shaping discourses around genocide and have helped frame universal claims to human rights. Such processes invoke a broader debate on the question of human rights and the politics of representation. In recent years, for instance, feminist scholars and activists have debated the ways in which movements and claims invoking a language of human rights have invoked subtle yet important strategies of representation. On the one hand, proponents of a human rights approach have pointed to the strategic importance of expanding conceptions of human rights to include gendered violence (Okin 2000). On the other hand, critics have suggested that the language of human rights has often masked subtle national narratives and interests while presenting women largely in Third World contexts as passive, essentialized victims of their cultures (Barlow 2000).

Such debates have focused on the politics of gender and race in discursive strategies that produce categories such as violence, genocide, and victims. However, these debates for the most part have not addressed the significance of representations of the Holocaust in framing the historical development of both national and global debates on human rights. The study of the Holocaust and Holocaust representation stands to present a crucial historical and comparative framework that can inform feminist and postcolonial debates on the issue of human rights.

The interweaving of national and global narratives shapes the politics of representation and the production of sociocultural memory in varying ways and through a wide range of cultural forms such as film, fiction, museums, and oral history. The implications of Holocaust representation, particularly in popular

cultural forms such as films (e.g., Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*), become contingent on the specificities of the national and transnational contexts in which such forms circulate. In considering the question of the implications of Holocaust representation, one needs to ask to what extent the actual form of representation (a popular culture film versus an in-depth interview) shapes the effects and implications of the cultural memory produced. To what extent is the success of the realist strategies of film and other cultural representations of the Holocaust (e.g., the black-and-white documentary style) a reflection of broader patterns such as the growing consumer demand for "authentic" or real-life stories in the United States? Feminist scholars have critically analyzed the power effects of the consumption of a form of modernist authenticity embedded in the real stories of Third World women in the form of testimonials, autobiographies, and film (Trinh 1991).

These questions point to the much larger issue of how one engages in the representation of the violence of the Holocaust without inadvertently producing a form of epistemic violence through the act of representation, that is, without turning genocide into spectacle (in the case of more popular cultural representations of the Holocaust). The question becomes particularly difficult in the contemporary context of public and media representations in which the visualization of violence has often led to the production of what Rey Chow (1991:84) has called the "surplus value of spectacle."

Such questions have also recently emerged as feminist scholars and activists have struggled with ways to provide the space for women to retell the stories of genocidal rapes in contexts such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia (Hesford and Kozol 2001). For instance, I have examined the discrepancies of representation of a well-known low-caste woman dacoit, Phoolan Devi (recently murdered in India) by juxtaposing two forms of representation, a film, *Bandit Queen* (1994), popular in both the West and in India, and a transcribed/translated autobiographical account of Phoolan Devi's life (Fernandes 1999). Both the film and the autobiography have circulated transnationally and have claimed to represent the "real" life story of the protagonist. The film in particular has raised difficult ethical questions of representation publicly debated both in India and in Western contexts as it presented graphic scenes of violent rape. In considering these questions, I have argued that rather than revert to a binary approach that either invokes or rejects representations of the real, particularly in the case of representing violence and trauma, we should focus instead on an analysis of such represen-

tations' power effects—effects shaped both by the specific strategies of representation deployed and the specificities of the context in which the representation is interpreted and received. When viewed from a transnational perspective, the power effects of representation are not unitary, and they may even prove contradictory. Thus, for instance, *Bandit Queen's* graphic depictions of rape and violence did manage to disrupt public silences on rape in the Indian context. Yet they also played into neo-Orientalist stereotypes of Indian men in Western contexts.

The effects of strategies of representation in regard to stories of trauma and violence are thus further complicated by the transnational circulation of cultural forms. At one level, cultural representations and memories travel across national boundaries. At another level, their meanings are contingent on the local and national histories of the communities that receive these forms and memories. The challenge of representing Holocaust memory thus engages with and raises particularly important issues regarding the politics of representation and the transnational production and circulation of such representations which prove of interest to a wide range of intellectual fields: sociology, but also interdisciplinary studies that focus on questions of identity, culture, and politics.

A central issue arising in discussions of violence and representation concerns questions of agency and resistance. On the one hand, feminist scholars have argued that the representation of victims of violence as purely passive and devoid of agency and the capacity for resistance may hold the danger of enacting a form of epistemic violence (Mohanty 1991). On the other hand, the case of extreme forms of violence such as genocide—where structural, state-organized violence may severely foreclose the possibility for resistance—complicates the picture. Einwohner's essay makes an important contribution to this debate through an analysis of organized Jewish resistance that carefully examines the social factors and conditions conducive to and inhibitive of participation in various forms of resistance. By examining the ways in which factors such as access to social networks, gender, and age shaped participation in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the essay stresses the existence of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust without implicitly representing nonparticipants as passive victims. Thus Einwohner's sociological perspective engages with and informs broader debates on agency, resistance, and representation that have shaped interdisciplinary research in comparative contexts.

In fields such as feminist and postcolonial studies, such debates have for the

most part addressed the role and location of victims of violence. While attempts to understand both the nature of violence and the appropriate strategies of representation have been shaped by this focus on victims, the perpetrators of violence have received less attention. Olick's essay makes a substantial contribution in this regard by turning our attention to the role and responsibility of everyday Germans in supporting the Nazi regime and its violence. Such an approach both engages with and substantially reworks the terms of current debates on violence and genocide by shifting our lens to the dailiness of the extant support for genocide and violence.

At a deeper level, the essay asks us to consider the ethical and political implications that arise when the witnesses of violence and genocide come from the dominant social group implicated in the violence, rather than from the victimized group. How, in other words, do we understand the role of violence in constructing the subjectivity of the perpetrators and tacit supporters of such violence? Writing in a different context, Veena Das (2000), in her essay on the effects of widespread violence during the partition between India and Pakistan, writes of the long-standing effects that the act of witnessing violence has for the construction of subjectivity. For the victims, the witnessing of such violence, Das suggests, forms an integral component of the bodily violence itself. She examines the dailiness of these effects for survivors and explores the ways in which they must continually reinhabit the space of injury in the fabric of everyday life.

If the effects of violence permeate the daily life of victims, Olick's essay asks us to confront the ways in which the effects of violence permeate the lives of perpetrators or of those who may have tacitly condoned or benefited from genocide. These issues raise broader questions regarding collective and ethical responsibility for violence and genocide in a range of comparative contexts. Such issues also spark a series of concerns regarding the politics of representation, which, as Olick notes, involve questions such as how to draw boundaries between collective guilt and collective/ethical responsibility, or how to produce narratives on the perpetrators that can address their human suffering while circumventing the moral risks of sympathizing with and inadvertently justifying their actions.

Taken together, the essays in this section inform and in important ways contribute to broader debates on the politics and ethics of representation. It seems that the central challenge is one of producing Holocaust memory and representations that enact a form of witnessing rather than of spectatorship—a

difficult project in the context of contemporary processes of cultural commodification, and one further complicated when witnessing is defined in relation to perpetrators, as well as to victims. For scholars, this challenge raises the need to think more seriously about the ethics of representation. The question that I want to end with, then, is one that asks what kinds of ethical practices of representation can be produced when considering the important issues the essays raise about history, memory, and the Holocaust.

Methodological questions in the social sciences have usually tended to focus more on questions of objectivity and scientific rigor rather than on questions regarding the politics of representation. Meanwhile, poststructuralist criticisms have tended to focus more on the power effects of representations. Yet the significance of representing the Holocaust seems to suggest a need for a discussion of a form of ethical action that would need to be embedded in practices of representation. All the essays I discuss here, for instance, touch on the sacredness associated with the Holocaust. Taking seriously this sacredness would require the development of a set of ethical practices that cannot be contained in the narrower preoccupations with objectivity or power that characterize a great deal of the contemporary social sciences. The larger question is thus one that would ask how Holocaust memory and representations would need to transform existing methodological assumptions and discursive practices within the discipline of sociology or the social sciences at large—a question that points to the significance that Holocaust research holds for scholars working in both comparative contexts and interdisciplinary fields of study.