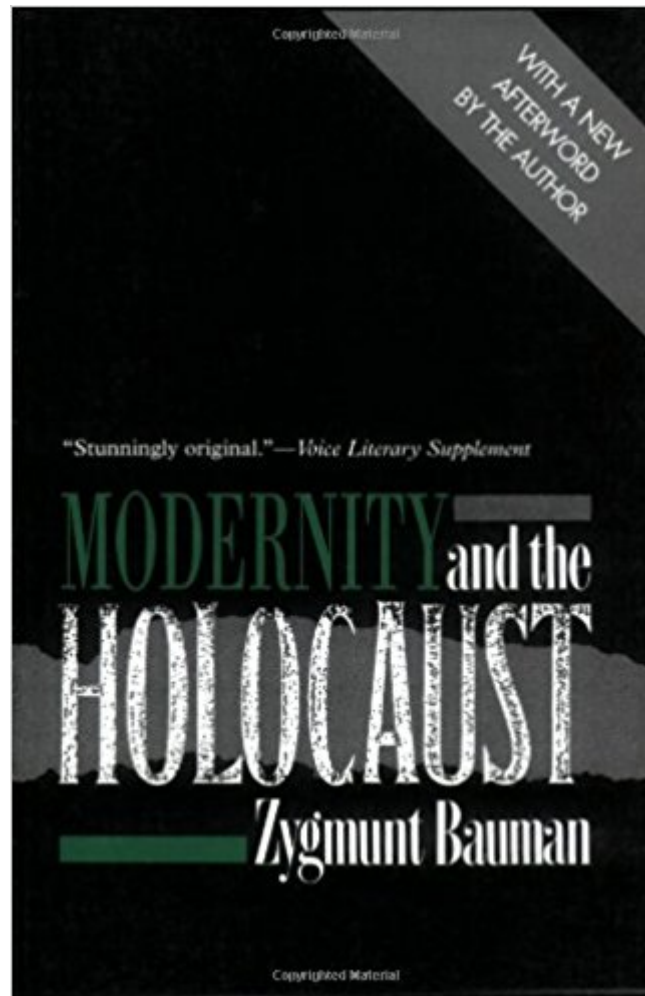




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Modernity And The Holocaust



Synopsis

A new afterword to this edition, "The Duty to Remember—But What?" tackles difficult issues of guilt and innocence on the individual and societal levels. Zygmunt Bauman explores the silences found in debates about the Holocaust, and asks what the historical facts of the Holocaust tell us about the hidden capacities of present-day life. He finds great danger in such phenomena as the seductiveness of martyrdom; going to extremes in the name of safety; the insidious effects of tragic memory; and efficient, "scientific" implementation of the death penalty. Bauman writes, "Once the problem of the guilt of the Holocaust perpetrators has been by and large settled . . . the one big remaining question is the innocence of all the rest—not the least the innocence of ourselves." Among the conditions that made the mass extermination of the Holocaust possible, according to Bauman, the most decisive factor was modernity itself. Bauman's provocative interpretation counters the tendency to reduce the Holocaust to an episode in Jewish history, or to one that cannot be repeated in the West precisely because of the progressive triumph of modern civilization. He demonstrates, rather, that we must understand the events of the Holocaust as deeply rooted in the very nature of modern society and in the central categories of modern social thought.

Book Information

Paperback: 254 pages

Publisher: Cornell University Press (February 23, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0801487196

ISBN-13: 978-0801487194

Product Dimensions: 1 x 6 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars 17 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #137,029 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #47 in Books > Textbooks >

Humanities > Religious Studies > Judaism #119 in Books > History > World > Religious >

Judaism #274 in Books > History > World > Jewish > Holocaust

Customer Reviews

"A stunningly original set of reflections on racism, extermination, rationality, individual responsibility in criminal societies, and the sources of obedience and resistance."—Voice Literary Supplement
Such is the concentrated brilliance of Modernity and the Holocaust that it is sure to find

an appreciative audience in every field of research which touches on the Holocaust (or which has been touched by it). Above all, to those who still hold faith with the notions of civilization, progress, and reason, this book will sit alongside others which have challenged fundamental beliefs of our time."~ Times Literary Supplement"Intellectually rich and provocative. . . . This is a text which belongs in our classrooms as well as on our shelves. Exceptionally well written."~ Contemporary Sociology"A new afterword to this edition tackles difficult issues of guilt and innocence on the individual and societal levels."~ Shofar, Summer 2001, Vol. 19, No. 4"This book is an intense scrutiny of the lengths to which haters sink in displaying their hostility to targeted victims of that malady sometimes called xenophobia."~ Rabbi Sam Silver. Indiana Jewish Post and Opinion. 8/22/01

Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017) was Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the Universities of Leeds and Warsaw. He is the author of many works including Legislators and Interpreters (Polity Press) and Modernity and Ambivalence (Polity Press). He was also awarded the Theodor W. Adorno Prize in 1998.

Zygmunt Bauman, a leading sociologist who has done a great deal of seminal work on modernity (in the perception of someone like me who is not a sociologist), turns his attention to the Holocaust of European Jewry in this book under the inspiration of his wife, who lived through it, survived it and has chronicled her experiences. Bauman was born in Poland, an epicentre of the Nazi "final solution of the Jewish problem", though he managed to flee to the Soviet Union and spent the war serving as an officer of the Red Army. In contrast to Daniel Goldhagen's analysis in Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust, which sees a long and deeply entrenched tradition of viciously eliminationist anti-Semitism, among ordinary Germans as a sine qua non for the Holocaust, Bauman denies flatly that ordinary Germans were viciously anti-Semitic and that deep-rooted atavistic instincts made the Holocaust possible. On his account, rather than being the expression of primitive instincts, what made the Holocaust possible was modernity, represented by an efficient and rational managerial bureaucracy, nested in the context of a totalitarian State. Bauman's analysis is intelligent and demanding. The book does not make for easy reading, either emotionally or intellectually, but it is well worth the effort it takes to work through it. It should be of interest to anyone concerned with the Holocaust, with the history and dynamics of genocide and attempted genocide in Armenia early in the previous century, in Kampuchea, and in Rwanda, inter alia, and about modernity, bureaucracy, and ethics, whether the readers agree with Bauman's

compellingly-argued thesis or not.

This is one of those rock-em, sock-em books that seems to have a startling insight on every page. Bauman's thesis is that the Holocaust is not an aberration, peculiar to a particular time and place, but a general symptom of modernity. In other words, events akin to the Holocaust are capable of happening again and again in the modern world. The book is thus frightening and sobering.

Bauman argues that modern institutions are characterized by dispassionate bureaucratic efficiency assisted by technology. Large government and corporate bureaucracies function in such a way that individual responsibility for the actions of the bureaucracy are dispersed. In other words, the buck is passed through the system, without a Harry Truman to say, "The buck stops here." The danger, according to Bauman, is that if a Hitler rises to the top of such a bureaucracy, he can set the system rolling toward an inhumane goal (the destruction of the Jews in Europe), and it is possible that nobody within the system or outside it will be able (or interested enough) to do much to stop it. The book highlights (for me) the crucial importance of checks and balances within systems, and strong investigative journalism as an important component to a functioning democracy. It also suggests to me the importance of keeping authoritarians out of high public office. They can set large systems rolling in disastrous directions.

Mr. Bauman's approach to this subject is entirely new to me. His grasp of historical information is exceptional, and he ties it to sociological information very well.

This book is a very well-written, in-depth analysis of how the modern, "civilized" mindset enabled normal, everyday Germans (businessmen, professors, soldiers, journalists -- just like your average U.S. citizens) to either actively participate or stand by and do nothing while the leaders of their nation murdered millions of people (the vast majority of whom -- 14 million out of 20 million -- were political opponents, not Jews -- 6 out of 20 million). As the U.S. government is currently murdering millions of people over in the Middle East, everyday Americans are standing around -- either supporting it or doing nothing. For instance 2.5 million people died in the U.S. invasion of Vietnam, tens of thousands of people still die each year in Laos from all of the leftover cluster bombs dropped there by the U.S. (look up "laos plain of jars"), and over 2 million people (500,000 of whom are children) have died in Iraq since the first Persian Gulf War as a result of economic sanctions and U.S. aerial strikes (look up "madeline albright iraq sanctions")--- this is just slightly under the number of Jews that the Nazi regime killed, and it's only three of the U.S.'s dozens of wars that took place

during the 20th century. This is the topic of this book -- what causes everyone to stand around and justify large scale, state sanctioned murder? Is it cowardice, cruelty, or something else?

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Great book.

Unique perspective on an important topic.

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