

• ARTICLES •

Model Murderers

Afterthoughts on the Goldhagen method and history

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Whatever else you might say about Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1997), it certainly is a remarkable book. Although it has been attacked by most specialists, Goldhagen's rewritten thesis has sold like hot cakes to the general public. 'The book has been discussed and critiqued *ad nauseam*', Steven Ascheim already observed in 1997, and even that seems an understatement (Ascheim 1997: 241). 'Few works indeed have achieved greater success and have aroused more heated debate in recent memory than Daniel Goldhagen's work', noted Istvan Deak, another informed spectator of the intellectual Holocaust scene (Deak 1997: 295). Even Ian Kershaw – who usually relativizes the importance of public discussions for historiographical developments – devotes a whole new paragraph to the Goldhagen phenomenon in his recent revised edition of *The Nazi-Dictatorship*.¹ And Ulrich Herbert's comment hits the nail on the head. Referring to Eberhard Jäckels judgement that Goldhagen's best seller was 'simply a bad book', Herbert remarked that Jäckel seemed to miss the point: 'It is bad, but not *simply* bad' (Herbert 1999: 47).

Its grave scholarly deficiencies notwithstanding, retrospectively one has to admit that Goldhagen's book is one of the few studies that has exerted a traceable influence on the historical agenda. *HWE* did so by putting both the question about the involvement of the *Wehrmacht* in the Holocaust on the agenda of German historians and the question about the motives of the perpetrators of the Holocaust (while Christopher Browning's far superior *Ordinary Men* in 1992 did not) (1992).² By giving a very simplified and wrong answer, Goldhagen's book immediately provoked an unprecedented interest in the right answers. *HWE*, in a paradoxical way, has thus highlighted the serious lack of knowledge about the composition and the motivations of the Holocaust perpetrators. Given the continuing centrality of the Nazi period for the self-definition of the Berlin Republic, this is no small deal (Frevert and Assmann 1998; Hettling 2000: 357–78).

Of course, Goldhagen did not manage this change of the historical agenda all by himself, however hard he tried to create this impression. *HWE* and the debate caused by its publication both firmly fit in the general process of

coming to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) of a reunited Germany in the 1990's. The famous exhibition of the crimes of the *Wehrmacht* in East Central Europe did in fact provoke similar questions in 1995, although it did not provide answers as to motivations. Nevertheless, this exhibition suggested, in its original uncorrected version at least, a similar answer as to the significant involvement of ordinary Germans in the Holocaust. So both *HWE* and the *Wehrmacht*-exhibition fundamentally questioned the founding myth of *both* post-war German states, that is the idea that the massive Nazi crimes could be attributed almost exclusively to a minority of clearly identifiable Nazis and to clearly identifiable Nazi organizations, like the SS. This was no great news for specialists, but for the public at large it surely was. By questioning the traditional borderline between the Nazis and the rest of the Germans – and by questioning it in a shocking way³ – both *HWE* and the *Wehrmacht*-exhibition paved the way for further historical discussions about the involvement of ordinary Germans in the Nazi-system, including the involvement of the German historians.⁴

This paradoxical success of *HWE* has not gone unnoticed and has called forth explanations that went beyond the publishers astute marketing strategy and the young author's charisma. A variety of contextual explanations for the Goldhagen-phenomenon have been presented, explanations which clarified the relationships between the simplified argument of the book, the omissions in the existing Holocaust-research and the specific needs of the second post-war-generation, especially in the USA and Germany (Heil and Erb 1998). This ground has been covered extensively and satisfactorily and I do not intend to go over trodden paths once more.⁵ Instead of analysing the contexts of *HWE*, I will here take a closer look at the *methodological* and *theoretical* anatomy of *HWE*, which has attracted far less attention until now. Only recently, two historical sociologists published a methodological analysis of the book, in which they concluded that Goldhagen failed in terms of his *own* social scientific research design (Mahoney and Ellsberg 1999: 422–36). Because of all the intellectual energy that Goldhagen's book has absorbed, it might be worthwhile to take a closer look at its theoretical underpinnings. I will try to do so by clarifying the *conceptual* structure of the book, because this structure sheds light on the internal *logic* behind the overwhelming abundance of *empirical* problems noticed in the critiques. There is more system to *HWE*'s deficiencies than meets the eye.

My main argument will be that the most important empirical problems that have been noted by the critics can basically be explained by Goldhagen's identification of (German) history with a model. As such, *HWE* offers a telling illustration of a more general problem sometimes observed in social science history, that of *Model-Platonism* (*Modelplatonismus* in German).⁶ This problem boils down to the identification of a model that is supposed to

order reality, with reality *itself*. In such cases, the tool determines the problem instead of the other way around. So what is often presented as an advantage of social scientific history: the explicit ordering and explanation of historical data with the help of a social science model, in this case helps to explain the fundamental flaws and the critical reception of *HWE* among historians. The presupposed methodological advantage, thus, turns out to be a serious disadvantage, and this contributes to the paradoxical character of *HWE*.

Goldhagen is originally a political scientist and with this book, he has strayed self-confidently into the territory of Holocaust historians. This is important in this case, for he specifically presents himself as a theoretical and methodological innovator, frequently hauling his critics over the coals by appealing to social science methods.⁷ It is important, therefore, to analyse what he understands these to mean, all the more so because he takes his central question straight from common sense, rather than linking it to the academic debate on the Holocaust.⁸

The question of whether ordinary Germans actually wanted the Holocaust, because of their anti-Semitic prejudices is undoubtedly important, but it can only be a starting point for disciplined research if the exact nature of the question is clarified, that is to say; which comparisons are under discussion.⁹ Ordinary Germans as opposed to unusual Germans? Ordinary Germans as opposed to ordinary non-Germans? Want as opposed to do not want, want less, do not really want, and so on? German anti-Semitism as opposed to non-German anti-Semitism? It is on exactly this count of precision and clarity of meaning that *HWE* fails the reader completely, despite all the space Goldhagen has devoted to his method and his theoretical framework. All *HWE*'s methodological dress up notwithstanding, retrospectively its most striking characteristic turns out to be that it does not even succeed in sensibly framing a clear *historical* question. I shall argue below that this problem is basically due to *HWE*'s identification of German history with a preconceived model: there simply is no research question in *HWE*, because the model applied to history is identified with German history *itself* and therefore already *contains* all the answers. The basic function of the facts is just to illustrate the model instead of testing a hypothesis in a comparative way, as Goldhagen himself repeats *ad nauseam*.

Goldhagen's method

An obvious starting point for an analysis of the method in *HWE* is an investigation of the author's own claims about it. In that way, we will find out how he himself places the book and which conceptual opposites he uses. According to Goldhagen, his work is not an ordinary, narrative history of the

Holocaust, but a 'primarily explanatory and theoretical' study in which he wants to 'isolate the influence of anti-Semitism in order to test its causal efficacy' (1997: 467). His aim is 'to explain why the Holocaust occurred, to explain how it could occur' (1997: 5).

Goldhagen, in using these contrasts, clearly presents himself as a sophisticated social scientist as opposed to an ordinary historian; the impressionist descriptions and narratives of historians are diametrically opposed to the scientific tests of causal hypotheses derived from theories, which are carried out by social scientists. Goldhagen frequently gives historians a good talking-to about their theoretical, methodological, conceptual and analytical shortcomings. 'The conventional explanations' enormous shortcomings [moreover] are not only empirical. They suffer from common conceptual and theoretical failings', says Goldhagen, who later specifies these 'shortcomings' 'profound' (1997: 379, 392).

Goldhagen's suspicion and contempt of the status of historical narrative is shared by quite a few other political scientists, who openly doubt the epistemological credentials of narratives. Based either on modernist or on postmodernist premises, they fundamentally question the narrative mode of traditional history. Take, for instance, a typical statement in a case of recent date: 'Narratives, it was recognized, embody explanations. But they often mobilize mythology and hagiography of their times, mixing literary tropes, notions of morality and causal reasoning in efforts both to justify and to explain. Social scientists therefore found it difficult to extract defensible propositions from these complex mixtures'. No wonder these political scientists go on to cite Robert Fogel in order to advocate 'the abandonment of narrative accounts and the exploration, through statistics, of regular and systematically generated events' (Bates 1998: 12)¹⁰

Nevertheless, Goldhagen's book consists for the most part of descriptive case studies, in which he reconstructs in detail the contributions to the Holocaust of the reserve police force, the labour camps and the death marches. These stories, however, remain subservient to explanatory objectives, because the point here should be the comparative testing of different hypotheses (Goldhagen 1997: 467–8). He refers to his own central hypothesis (i.e. that the specifically German form of eliminationist anti-Semitism was *the* motivation for the perpetrators of the Holocaust to murder the Jews *en masse*) in comparison with the hypotheses of other Holocaust historians. Aided by his case studies, he claims to isolate the influence of anti-Semitism in order to be able to determine its causal effect. In this context also, he talks repeatedly about the testing (and even about the stringent and tough testing) of his hypothesis.

In the light of the state of the discussion among historians, Goldhagen's aim was, of course, remarkable, since Holocaust historians stopped trying to

reduce the total complexity of the Holocaust to a single motivational factor at least some thirty years ago.¹¹ Although, directly after 1945, anti-Semitism was regarded by many as the explanatory factor, the belief in a *single* motivational factor for all perpetrators of the Holocaust has long been abandoned. Instead of single factor explanations (which were also often pinned on Hitler), more complex explanations have appeared emphasizing combinations of diverse motives and the interaction between motives and variable circumstances of place and time. There has been no room ever since, in the historical debate, for monolithic and single motive explanations of the Holocaust. As Steve Ascheim noted:

We have come full circle. Goldhagen has again inflamed and re-energized the debate by revalidating and recirculating (what was thought to be) the discredited *Sonderspecies* archetype, the notion of ordinary Germans as anti-Semitic murderers, impelled to kill exclusively in terms of this historically conditioned, fanatic belief. Scholars have criticized this (correctly, in my view) by arguing that individual genocidal acts can be better explained in terms of a complex cluster of motivational factors. These obviously include anti-Semitism as a central force but also take into account other ideological ingredients. Moreover, they recognize the weight of situational factors and take into account generalized psychological mechanisms, evidenced by the equally murderous activities of other national groups (both in the Shoah and elsewhere) that render more intelligible the qualitative leap from conventional every-day prejudice to radical genocidal action.

(Ascheim 1997: 248–9)

This state of discussion was, in fact, completely ignored by Goldhagen. Remarkably, he even openly admitted that he preferred single factor explanations to ‘some strained patchwork explanation’, without specifying empirical grounds for his preference (Goldhagen 1997: 594, n. 42). I believe this is no coincidence, because this explanatory preference can also be reduced to his a priori identification of German history with his single motivational factor model. Small wonder, therefore, *HWE* actually *is* little else than an exercise in single motivational factor explanation, although this explanation is made plausible by a refutation of competing explanations, as social science hypothesis testing prescribes. Therefore, competing motivations are checked superficially only to be rejected. Let us have a quick look at his checklist (Goldhagen 1997: 10–14, 375–416).

According to Goldhagen, there are others who claim that the perpetrators committed the mass murders because Germans are exceptionally *susceptible to authority* or to *external pressure* and so will *always* follow orders, irrespective of their content. Names of recent historians who uphold this explanation, however, are hard to find (Goldhagen 1997: 379). Yet, other historians seek the explanation in-group pressure, which would account for

why individuals with moral inhibitions ‘joined in’ nevertheless. Christopher Browning rendered this partial explanation plausible in his book *Ordinary Men*. The motive of self-interest or opportunism has also been proposed as a partial explanation for the perpetrators; they would have been prepared to do anything to ensure that their careers were not harmed. Hans Mommsen and Götz Aly, who investigated the bureaucrats involved in the Holocaust, are mentioned as representatives of this point of view. Finally, according to Goldhagen, there is the proposed explanation of the *bureaucratic division of labour*, whereby the bureaucratic perpetrators had no idea of their contribution to the project as a whole and therefore felt no responsibility. This banal explanation for the banality of evil (Hannah Arendt) is attributed to Raul Hilberg, Zygmunt Bauman and Michael Marrus.

Not surprisingly, none of these competing motives withstands the test of Goldhagen’s case studies, although he fails to specify how the comparison of the causal impact of the different motives is assessed. Remarkably for a social scientist propagating social science methodology, there is no weighting of competing hypotheses or of their relative probabilities, given the evidence. Although he constantly refers to the need to explain the Holocaust by way of comparison, the relevant comparisons are glaringly absent. This holds as well for the comparison of Germans with non-Germans as perpetrators of mass murder as for the comparison of Jews with non-Jews as victims of German mass murder. Goldhagen never researches whether the cruelty was only specific for the German perpetrators and for their Jewish victims, although he does frame these questions – characteristically *post festum* – at the very end of *HWE*. Typically, he merely suggests some tantalizing and unsubstantiated answers (1997: 408) in order to return as fast as possible to his familiar track (1997: 409). The answer to this crucial question is simply assumed a priori in order to attribute the cruelty to the specific German brand of anti-Semitism and so maintains the fabric of his central argument. His answer is based on his central assumption that there exists a special and negative relationship between Jewishness and Germanness. Because of this assumption, there is only a rhetoric of comparison in *HWE*, and not actual comparative research.

Only the outcome of Goldhagen’s uncontrollable comparisons is crystal clear: there is just *one* motive that accounted for the German mass murder of the Jews and that is the mass *will* to murder Jews *en masse* that existed (until 1945) among the Germans. Motives other than anti-Semitism might perhaps clarify individual murders, but not the Holocaust as a whole. That was simply ‘a German national project’, the work of ‘ordinary Germans’, alias ‘Hitler’s willing executioners’. As far as the motives of the Holocaust perpetrators are concerned, therefore, a ‘mono-causal explanation’ is sufficient, i.e. the specifically German ‘racist, eliminationist anti-Semitism’ (Goldhagen 1997:

10–11, 404, 416–7): ‘Germans could say “no” to mass murder. They chose to say “yes”’ (Goldhagen 1997: 381). Because they did not murder under external pressure, they must have acted out of their own free will.

At one point in the text, he typifies this motive as a necessary and sufficient condition for the actions of the Holocaust perpetrators.¹² This characterization implies the strongest possible explanatory claim and leads us to the heart of Goldhagen’s method. Therefore, in my opinion, it can rightly be regarded as *the* Freudian slip of *HWE*. What the characterization amounts to, after all, is that the mass murder of the Jews could not have taken place unless the Germans were driven by this motive (because it is necessary), and also that this motive led inevitably to the murderous actions of the Germans against the Jews (because it was in itself sufficient). So in this passage Goldhagen posits an inseparable link between the Germans (until 1945) and the Holocaust, and can thus even maintain that the Holocaust was predictable.¹³

Later on in his argument, Goldhagen wisely omits to mention German anti-Semitism as a sufficient condition, only alluding to it as a necessary condition of the Holocaust. However, this move does not suffice to back up Goldhagen’s explanatory claim, because this move opens the door for marshalling an indefinite number of necessary causes for the Holocaust and thus may lead him straight to the type of patchwork explanation he explicitly rejected.¹⁴ In order to uphold his special explanatory claim – and the explicit rationale for writing *HWE* – Goldhagen, therefore, has to stick to anti-Semitism as the sufficient motivational condition.

The aforementioned Freudian slip is the key to Goldhagen’s model and method, because the conviction that Goldhagen expresses in it – namely of a necessary and sufficient relationship between the Germans and the Holocaust – turns out not to be the product of his empirical research (as he asserts over and over again) but to be a presupposition that is introduced in advance of empirical research. Although this presupposition is simultaneously referred to as a hypothesis, it is never submitted to any serious testing: it is in fact, simultaneously both the premise and the conclusion of *HWE*. Just as the Jewishness of the Holocaust-victims can be established a priori, so is the German-ness of the Holocaust-perpetrators in *HWE*.

Now, of course, every research design contains a certain circular element, because the design specifies which factors will be dealt with and thus – by implication – which are left out. There is, in principle, nothing wrong with this type of ‘circularity’, because selection is the prize we pay for empirical research as such.¹⁵ The only proviso of scholarly research, however, is that the relationships between the variables within the limits of the research design are established on the basis of research, i.e. by empirical means, and not by definitional means, i.e. a priori. This is exactly the point where *HWE* takes a wrong and fateful turn, because Goldhagen’s conclusion, that the

(motivational) explanation of the Holocaust is the eliminationist anti-Semitism of the Germans, is already contained in his definitions and by no means the result of his empirical ‘testing’ of various hypotheses.

Goldhagen puts the conceptual relationship between the Germans and the Holocaust straight into the first chapter of his book, where he identifies the Holocaust perpetrators as *a single homogeneous collective and national subject*, i.e. ‘the Germans!’ (1997: 6) No Germans, no Holocaust, is how Goldhagen’s argument reads for this radical conceptual step. The most important consequence of this definition is undoubtedly that, in this way, the *national identity* of the Germans is exalted to the *distinctive and explanatory feature of their being mass murderers* of the Jews. Goldhagen makes no bones about his central argument:

The first task in restoring the perpetrators to the centre of our understanding of the Holocaust is to restore to them their identities, grammatically by using not the passive but the active voice in order to ensure that they, the actors, are not absent from their own deeds (as in, ‘five hundred Jews were killed in city X on date Y’), and by eschewing convenient, yet inappropriate and obfuscating labels, like ‘Nazi’s’ and ‘SS men’, and calling them what they were, ‘Germans’.
(1997: 6)

Goldhagen, thus, seemed to subscribe to the remarkable theory that the individual identity of the perpetrators can be reduced to one collective identity, i.e. their being German. Whatever the empirical status of this theory, it surely is a great help in order to write Holocaust-history in monolithic categories of ‘German perpetrators versus Jewish victims’ and to obliterate Primo Levi’s morally disquieting ‘grey zone’.

After having defined the identity of the Holocaust perpetrators as the German national identity, Goldhagen goes on to define Nazism and German society: ‘The Holocaust was the defining aspect of Nazism, but not only of Nazism. It was the defining feature of German society during its Nazi period’ (1997: 8). Later on, he drops this time limit imperceptibly, when eliminationist anti-Semitism becomes the defining feature of German culture and history as a whole (from the Middle Ages until 1945) (1997: 49–128). According to this definition, being an eliminationist anti-Semite is a characteristic of Germans, just as having stripes is a characteristic of zebras. This definition of Germans in terms of ‘eliminationist anti-Semitism’ also explains why Goldhagen remains almost blind to other categories of German victims except Jews, as has been noted by some of his critics.

My interpretation of Goldhagen’s method clarifies some important empirical problems with the book, which have been pointed out in the reviews. First of all, it becomes apparent *why* there is an absence of systematic empirical comparisons between Germans and non-Germans. This is also the case for

German and non-German anti-Semitism; Goldhagen already knows beforehand how German anti-Semitism differs from non-German varieties, as has been pointed out in the critiques of Browning, Pohl, Birn and Finkelstein (Birn 1997: 1, 195–215; Finkelstein 1997: 39–87; Browning 1996: 1, 88–108; Pohl 1997). On the grounds of Goldhagen's assumptions as outlined above, such comparative research is as superfluous as a comparative study of the difference between zebras and horses, when we already know that zebras have stripes and horses do not. Whatever is presented as a conceptual trait or by definition (in Goldhagen's case, the German-ness of the Holocaust perpetrators and the specifically genocidal character of modern German anti-Semitism) does not need any more empirical research. Therefore there is a logical need in *HWE* to stick to one and only one explanatory factor, i.e. to mono-causal explanation. Goldhagen's open disdain for competing explanations – that is, for practically the *whole* of the existing scholarly literature on the Holocaust – is therefore also a consequence of his *conceptual* strategy and not accidental. When Goldhagen alludes to comparisons (as in the case of the death marches), therefore, it even cannot be a test of his hypothesis, but only the umpteenth 'illustration' of its accuracy.

Secondly, this conceptual link between the Germans, German society and eliminationist anti-Semitism explains why Goldhagen eventually runs into problems with the relationship between the presumed free will of Germans, their genocidal anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. If Germans were eliminationist anti-Semites purely on account of being German, and if this anti-Semitism led, by necessity, to genocidal actions (as Goldhagen's theory, by his own account, suggests), then Goldhagen's Germans, paradoxically, could do little other than execute their Holocaust. His later attempts (in the preface of the German edition of *HWE*) to free *HWE* from its determinist and collectivist implications are only paid by the price of total internal inconsistency (Goldhagen 1997: Appendix 3, 477–83). I shall deal with both these problems respectively.

The Holocaust as a German national project

Fundamentally important to *HWE* is the definition of the Holocaust as (1) German national and (2) a project. The first characterization contrasts with the generalizing interpretation à la Browning and Bauman, in which the Holocaust is classified as a (particular) example of (general) genocide. That is why Goldhagen (surprisingly, for a practitioner of generalizing social science), emphasizes *ad nauseam* the unique and specifically German character of the Holocaust. The characterization of the Holocaust as a 'project' contrasts with structuralist interpretations of the Third Reich, such as those of

Hans Mommsen and Martin Broszat. The fact that the debate between Holocaust-historians has moved beyond the opposition between intentionalism and structuralism in the past decade seems to have escaped Goldhagen's attention, however¹⁶. Structuralist historians explain the Holocaust as the consequence of an unplanned process of cumulative radicalization that was connected to the bipartite institutional structure of the Nazi state. According to this view, the Nazi state was not a monocratic dictatorship, where everyone immediately carried out Hitler's orders, but a polycracy, in which a chaotic battle of competency reigned between the old state organizations and those of the new Nazi regime. This power struggle was all about the institutional survival of the fittest and increasingly radical solutions to problems (among which, the 'Jewish problem') were invented and selected. So, according to this interpretation, the way to Auschwitz was not straight, as intentionalist historian's claim, but twisted.¹⁷

By defining the Holocaust as a 'project', *HWE* is firmly attached to the intentionalist track and Goldhagen makes no qualms about it. He argues that people – including Germans before 1945 – most certainly have a free will, which for Goldhagen basically means that if they did something, then they must have wanted to (1997: 116, 395): intention and consequence correspond with ease for Goldhagen. Because individuals (Germans) and collectives (Germany, ordinary Germans, and the German people) are simply identified with each other, there is no difference between what is intended by individuals and what they bring about collectively.¹⁸ This *super-intentionalism* (Götz Aly) is rather surprising in a social scientist, because social science is usually justified *vis-à-vis* history by its study of *unintentional* consequences of social actions and their logic. If everything was intentional and always went according to plan, it would result in social scientists being out of work. Due to his definition of the Holocaust as a – or rather the 'German national project', Goldhagen, however, has no choice but to cling to super-intentionalism. This super-intentionalism of Goldhagen's actor model is again, by necessity, translated into a completely linear model of German history, because German history can be no other than the progressive unfolding of the genocidal anti-Semitic intention, alias the genesis of the Holocaust. The essential *Geist* of German history has always been clothed in a brown uniform with a swastika, according to *HWE*.

No wonder that within *HWE*'s super-intentionalist universe, Germany's way from Luther to Auschwitz is dead straight (Goldhagen 1997: 132, 161–2, 422). The question by which route German history lead to Auschwitz can even not be meaningfully asked in *HWE*, because being German and being eliminationist are assumed to be identical. On the basis of this assumption Goldhagen is capable, when looking at photos from one Nazi demonstration in Nuremberg, of seeing 'the faces of ordinary Germans – that is, the collective

face of Nuremberg and of Germany', as well as their 'ardent support for their government and the eliminationist programme' (Goldhagen 1997: 102).

Due to the introduction of super-intentionalism, another fundamental problem, which torments most other practitioners of empirical social science, also simply disappears in *HWE* (although it is once referred to as a problem, only to be put aside abruptly).¹⁹ I refer here to the problem of how conclusions that are based on a very limited number of cases (for example, one, two or three police battalions, etc.) can have any bearing on larger collectives (the German police, or all of the ordinary Germans). Goldhagen's fundamental conclusion that the murderers of the Jews were ordinary Germans, therefore all ordinary Germans were murderers (criticized by nearly every reviewer), is not just an incidental blunder, but a necessary consequence of his (conceptual) strategy.²⁰ The only intrinsic definition that German-ness receives in *HWE* is the characteristic of eliminationist anti-Semitism: The German (until 1945) is simply the *anti-Jew*, and German nationalism is nothing other than eliminationist anti-Semitism. Goldhagen just elevates the negative symbiosis, that has characterized the Germans and Jews since Auschwitz, into the hallmark of German history as such and has projected its origins back into the Middle Ages.

A second consequence of this identification is that the free will of individual Germans disappears into their culture of eliminationist anti-Semitism. If being German necessarily meant being an eliminationist anti-Semite (until 1945), then individual Germans could do little or nothing other than pursue their national project, i.e. the Holocaust. Seen in this light, Hitler's willing executioners were culturally programmed (anti-Semitic) automatons. Among Goldhagen's reviewers, Pesch and Helle in particular have pointed out this paradoxical problem (Helle 1997: 2, 251–71; Pesch 1997: 152–62). The paradox is demonstrated yet again by the fact that Goldhagen was enough of a trend follower to wish to interpret cultures à la Geertz as social conversations, yet he reconstructed the German culture as a single *monologue* on eliminationist anti-Semitism, and ascribed to that anti-Semitism a similar status of unconsciousness as to the grammar of languages.²¹

Goldhagen's one-dimensional actor model of the German

The problems that result from Goldhagen identifying Germans with genocidal anti-Semitism, whilst still maintaining their free will, also crop up in his one-dimensional view of how people transform intentions into actions, i.e. his actor model, and in his one-dimensional view of German history. Both views are analysed respectively below.

Goldhagen's view of how people act seems to be grafted onto so-called

rational choice theory.²² This theory strives to explain the actions of individuals (actors) as the rational choice between alternative actions, based on certain fixed preferences. The free will of the individual is manifested in the choice. In this kind of theory, it is assumed that individuals possess fixed preferences, which are established in the actor model. An example of this is the model of *homo economicus* in the theory of economics; the economic model actor will always be guided in his choices by his economic preference, i.e. the optimal relationship between price and product. As most real-life individuals do not usually have such fixed and consistent preferences as the theoretically constructed model actors, they differ from each other significantly. For this reason alone, it is not wise to interchange real people and model actors. Most significantly, this is precisely what we see happen in *HWE*.

In his analysis of actions, Goldhagen makes a distinction between *ideals*, *intentions* and *implementation* (1997: 134–5). Ideals are an individual's thoughts as to what is optimally desirable in the world, independent of the limitations of reality. Intentions are the plans of action, which are derived from ideals but take into account the real limiting circumstances. Finally, implementation is the transformation of intentions into actions, taking into account the limiting circumstances and other, rival, intentions. By no means must implementation automatically reflect the intention in question. When circumstances are unfavourable, the relationship between ideal and implementation can even be exceptionally obscure, writes Goldhagen, apparently for a moment forgetful of his earlier super-intentionalism – at least *in theory*. In his case studies, however, he is able to show with ease the direct relationship between ideal, intention and implementation in the actions of the Germans.

Goldhagen goes on to use this three-stage model of actions to lend plausibility to the permanent presence, in German history, of the ideal of eliminationist anti-Semitism, even though this was often 'obscure' before 1933. What he does in his case studies amounts to the *identification of his actor model with the historical actors*. This results in Germans from the Nazi period being credited with the characteristics of model actors, who, by definition, make only rational choices because they are equipped solely with rational qualities. Goldhagen, then, simply postulates that Germans were actors with a will, who made deliberate choices in accordance with existing and evolving ideas. This means that Goldhagen interprets *all* actions (of Germans) as the result of a conscious process, in which preferences are *rationally* weighed against each other.

An illustration of his outlook can be found in his analysis of the death marches towards the end of the war. Why, wonders Goldhagen aloud, did the Germans go on putting the Jews to death, even after Himmler himself had given the order to stop? Wouldn't it have been more sensible, in view of the fast-approaching defeat, to have obeyed that order? Yes, it certainly would,

according to Goldhagen, but the Germans made the deliberate choice still to murder as many Jews as possible, simply because they wanted to. Germans (referred to elsewhere by Goldhagen as the new savages, who have so little in common with ordinary, modern human beings that they warrant an anthropological approach) (Goldhagen 1997: 15), are modelled here as the absolutely goal-rational children of the anti-Enlightenment, who always weigh up alternative actions in the light of their fixed preference, i.e. the elimination of Jews. Even in the chaos and madness of the last months of the war, Goldhagen finds a purely means-to-an-end rationality of the model actor in the concrete Germans.

In this identification of *historical* Germans with rational *model* actors, a drastic and fatal *reduction of historical complexity of action* takes place. Firstly, all actions that are non-deliberate, but just carried out mindlessly on a routine basis, are lost from view, as are all actions which spring from indifference, emotion and impulse, etc. During wartime, these kinds of action are, presumably, of some significance. After all, is the opposite of love not hate but indifference? And has Browning not suggested that even murder can become routine for ordinary people?

Secondly, an unjust *reduction of complexity of intentionality* takes place by means of this identification. In contrast to the afore-mentioned model actors, real people are often guided by a multitude of intentions, rather than just one, and the relationships between them are not always equally clear and stable. Thus, people who carry out ethnic cleansing are often guided not only by the ideological motive of effecting the ethnic purity of 'their' territory, but also by the motive of being able to plunder, rape and murder without punishment. On these two grounds, the complexity of action and intentionality is much greater in reality than in rational choice theory, and it is certainly impossible to interpret every human action as a manifestation of a rationally efficient free will.

But this is exactly what Goldhagen does, and not by accident either. His disinterest in the empirical complexity of the Germans' actions, as pointed out in the reviews is based on the fact that he already knows a priori the top priority of Germans, i.e. the elimination of the Jews. This results systematically in Goldhagen's one-dimensional treatment of the source material, which has been heavily criticized in the reactions of Birn, Browning, Pohl and Finkelstein.²³

Goldhagen's one-dimensional construct of German history

The model of German history that Goldhagen constructs perfectly reflects the one-dimensionality that is embodied in his actor model. This also is no

accident, as it is derived from a process used in classical sociology and philosophy of history. German history since the Middle Ages is transformed and reduced by Goldhagen to a linear prehistory of the Holocaust alias to the development of the Genocidal Anti-Semite. Whoever recognizes this movement can call, unconcernedly, the *Kristallnacht* ‘a proto-genocidal assault’ and the ‘psychological equivalent of genocide’ (Goldhagen 1997: 141). The attention to specific time, place and sequence of events, and to the complex interaction between movement and counter-movement, continuity and discontinuity, which is usual in ordinary history, is nowhere to be found in *HWE*. Just as social conversation in Germany (until 1945) is an anti-Semitic monologue, according to Goldhagen, so is German history (until 1945) linear.

This linear aspect of Goldhagen’s viewpoint can also be reduced to a systematic root. Because he already knows the direction and the outcome of German history (until 1945), i.e. the Holocaust, he does not have to concern himself with all kinds of trifling questions of time and place. This way of dealing with history is known as *teleological* (goal-oriented, as if the whole of German history was moving towards its goal of the Holocaust), *deterministic* (as if it was predetermined that German history should result in the Holocaust) and *anachronistic* (against chronology, because history before 1941 is seen from a point of view in time that did not exist for contemporaries). Most professional historians generally try to avoid this method of working, because they endeavour to convey history as it would have been experienced by contemporaries, i.e. as an open, undetermined and complex process, in which the outcome is never known beforehand, making conditions of time and place therefore essential.

Goldhagen’s outlook on the scholarly approach to history clearly differs from the common one: ‘Ground-level perspectives are highly instructive – and necessary – but they are only a supplement to, not a substitute for, the aerial overview’ (1997: 133). Accordingly, his view on the relationship between empirical research and theory is also the reverse from the usual one found among historians: ‘[Yet] the theoretical assessment alone is not sufficient. An empirical investigation is also necessary’ (1997: 128). But not as other Holocaust historians go about it, because they think that the Holocaust can be explained by universal motives, such as group pressure, opportunism etc. and are thus, according to Goldhagen, not really engaged in proper historical practice (1997: 389, 391, 470). Remarkably for a social scientist, Goldhagen apparently views Germanness as a particular characteristic in opposition with all general characteristics and not as a specific combination of general characteristics. This is another necessary consequence of the definitional identification of Germanness with genocidal anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.

To lend empirical plausibility to his theoretically constructed tunnel history of Germany, Goldhagen introduces a remarkable supporting construction, i.e.

the difference between *manifest* and *latent* anti-Semitism, which calls to mind the Marxist supporting construction of false class-consciousness. His problem is to explain why the development of eliminationist anti-Semitism was not always visible to everybody (including German Jews), and was only exalted to an official national project as from 1933. Goldhagen solves this problem by introducing the assumption that whenever eliminationist anti-Semitism was invisible, it was still omnipresent, but in a latent form. Circumstances dictated whether this anti-Semitism was manifest or latent, and how much chance it stood of being put into practice, but anti-Semitism itself did not change *au fond*. In a developmental process unspecified as to time and place, the idea of eliminating the Jews just went from bad to worse, until it came to its 'final' fruition with the Nazis. Circumstances, at best, could slow down this process temporarily, but they could not stop it. The essential *Ungeist* of German history inevitably just marched on and on and on, until it was stopped from outside in 1945.

Here too, a comparison of Goldhagen's historical view with that of classical Marxism is enlightening. In both views, history is a single movement, in which a single essence is becoming manifest in various stages. This essence is viewed as an immanent principle of the historical process, as well as a political utopia. When the last (utopian) stage is reached, then actual history comes to a halt.

In classical Marxism, the essence of history is the socialization of the means of production, which is crystallized through successive modes of production to eventually assume its definitive form in communism (the renowned classless society). In Goldhagen's view, anti-Semitism is the essence of German history, both as a force that really exists and as a (negative) utopia. In any case, he interprets German history as a succession of religious, ethnic and biological manifestations of eliminationist anti-Semitism. Eliminationist anti-Semitism took on its definitive shape under Hitler in the pursuit of a Jewless society. From Goldhagen's standpoint, then, actual German history comes to a halt after Hitler, in 1945, and from a systematic point of view, he can do little other than suddenly declare the post-war Germans cured of their age-old evil convictions about the Jews (see the preface to the German edition) (1997: Appendix 3, 477–84). Goldhagen's motor of German history simply runs out of its fuel without Genocidal anti-Semitism, just like the Marxist motor of history runs out of its fuel without class struggle.

Goldhagen's later explanation of the sudden disappearance of the genocidal, German brand of anti-Semitism after 1945 as a consequence of Germany's re-education and democratization was little else than a *deus ex machina*.²⁴ Besides, it was, of course, a wonderful political message for the general public, especially in Germany and in the USA, although he repeatedly disclaimed any moral or political intentions. And, paradoxically, Goldhagen's

message did provoke some reactions in Germany, which belied his central thesis that after 1945 anti-Semitism had evaporated in thin air.²⁵ One of *HWE*'s central theses – based on one of its central supporting constructions – was thus refuted in more than one way.

Epilogue

Goldhagen's *HWE* was a deliberate attempt to surpass (and do away with) traditional (Holocaust-) history, traditional (Holocaust-) historians and traditional historical method. This attempt has failed utterly, basically because of the resistance offered on basis of traditional historical method. What merits of *HWE* there are, thus must be located elsewhere than the author of *HWE* intended (thereby presenting an unintended refutation of intentionalism himself). In fact, the paradoxical merit of *HWE* lies mainly in its unintended demonstration that there was something fundamentally wrong with its *method*: the fact that *HWE*'s modelization of (German) history failed so openly, testifies to the enduring resistance of the historical facts to the imposing of constructions, that do not fit. This observation, of course, does not imply that theories and models play no role in history – they most certainly do²⁶ – but only that they should be developed and applied with due historical care. Clearly, however, modelling is no substitute for the hard work of the historian, let alone a short cut for the (at least double) hard work of the *comparative* historian. From this perspective, the fatal collision of *HWE* with historical method can be interpreted not only as the failure of social scientific model-propaganda, but at the same time as the failure of post-modern anything goes ideas. This connection should not come as a great surprise, because postmodernist positions are often the result of an inversion of modernist – scientististic – positions.²⁷ The lasting value of *HWE* may therefore consist in its function as a beacon of what students of history better *avoid*, because *Hitler's willing executioners* may have made its author into a millionaire, but at the same time it has wrecked his academic career.²⁸

Notes

- 1 Kershaw (2000: 251–262). This is all the more telling since Kershaw had removed the chapter on the *Historikerstreit*, included in 1989 in the 2nd edition, from his 3rd edition in 1993, because of its lack of historiographical impact.
- 2 Herbert, 'Academic and public discourses', 48: 'The question about the motives and forms of participation of Germans in the Holocaust has not been seriously posed by German historians. Not one German historian has investigated or thematized the fact, well-documented by German prosecuting attorneys in the 1960s and 1970s, that a significant number, and probably a majority, of the 'direct

- perpetrators' committed their crimes with enthusiasm'. See further: Gerlach (2000) and Browning (2000).
- 3 The 'shock character' and simplification of 'events' like *HWE* and the *Wehrmacht* exhibition are probably the necessary flipside of the public taboos they are breaking.
 - 4 For the discussion about the German historians see: Schöttler (1997) and Hohls and Jarausch (2000). For an overview of the historical controversies in Germany with a public character since the 1980s see my article, 'Bordercrossings. Some reflections on recent debates in German history', in Dan Michman (ed.) *Remembering the Holocaust in Germany 1945–2000: German strategies and Jewish responses* (New York, 2002, in press).
 - 5 Collections of critiques of Goldhagen are Schoeps (1997) and Shandley (1998).
 - 6 For an overview of the debate on the relationship between history and the social sciences, see Lorenz (1997: 323–67) (an English edition titled *Constructing the past. An Introduction into philosophy of history* is forthcoming with Princeton University Press).
 - 7 See especially Goldhagens 'Note on method', *HWE*, 467–73.
 - 8 For the relationship between the Goldhagen debate and the other recent public debates on the Nazi past, see *The dilemmas of commemoration: German debates on the Holocaust in the 1990s*, special issue of *German Politics and Society* 17 (1999), 3.
 - 9 For the general problems of comparison and contrast-class in history, see Lorenz (1999).
 - 10 See also the symposium on *Analytic narratives in Social Science History* 24 (2000), 4, especially the contributions of Daniel Carpenter, 'What is the marginal value of *Analytic Narratives?*' (653–69) and Theda Skocpol, 'Theory tackles history' (669–77). For a recent defence of the narrative mode in historical sociology, see Bryant (2000) and also Lorenz (2000: 348–63).
 - 11 For German historiography see Herbert (1992: 67–87), Frei (1992: 101–10) and Pohl (1997: 1–49).
 - 12 *HWE* (pp. 417–8): 'Not only was German antisemitism in this historical instance a *sufficient* cause, but it was also a *necessary* cause for such broad German participation in the persecution and mass slaughter of Jews, *and* for Germans to have treated Jews in all the heartless, harsh, and cruel ways that they did'. On p. 416, however, Goldhagen restricts this claim somewhat: 'With regard to the motivational cause of the Holocaust, for the vast majority of perpetrators, a mono-causal explanation does suffice'. The empirical basis for this restriction is not made explicit. For a general analysis of the idea of necessary and sufficient conditions, see Lorenz (1997: 188–207).
 - 13 *HWE* (p. 89): 'During its Nazi period, German antisemitism took predictable turns'.
 - 14 After all, the presence of such trivial things as guns, bullets, spades and gas, etc., were also necessary conditions for the Holocaust to occur, because without them it would not have occurred the way it actually did.
 - 15 This type of circularity was identified in the hermeneutical tradition as the 'hermeneutic circle' or 'spiral'.
 - 16 See Kershaw (2000: 93–134) for an overview of the debate until the present.
 - 17 For Martin Broszats structuralist interpretation and its problems see Lorenz (1998: xxvii–xliv). Van Pelt and Dwork recently enforced this interpretation in

- Auschwitz from 1270 to the present*, a meticulous history of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. According to their reconstruction, not only the way to 'Auschwitz', but also the ways of Auschwitz were anything but straightforward. See van Pelt and Dwork (1996).
- 18 HWE (pp. 46, 48, 77, 79, 82, 87, 102, 123–4, and esp. 399): 'A consonance between the macro, the meso and the micro existed, because the same beliefs moved policy makers, infused and shaped the character of the institutions of killing, and motivated the executors of genocidal policy. Of one mind, confronting their common foe, Germans in face-to-face relations with Jews, reproduced the thinking of those who shaped overall policy.'
 - 19 HWE (p. 468): '(So) even though the case chapters are devoted to only a few police battalions, 'work' camps, and death marches, my conclusions are buttressed by a still more extensive fund of knowledge'. Typically, conflicting or ambiguous evidence is not even mentioned as a possibility.
 - 20 See HWE p. 402, where he states that 'the conclusions drawn about the overall characteristics of the members actions [of the police battalions, ChrL] can, indeed must be, generalized to *the German people in general*. What these *ordinary* Germans did also could be expected of other *ordinary* Germans'.
 - 21 HWE (p. 46): 'An individual learns the cognitive models of his culture, like grammar, surely and effortlessly.' Although Goldhagen acknowledges 'exceptions to the rule' (p. 47), at the same time he sticks to his thesis that 'in Germany during the Nazi period an almost universally held conceptualization of the Jews existed which constituted what can be called an 'eliminationist' ideology [-]'
 - 22 See, for rational choice theory and its problems, the discussion on *Analytic narratives* in note 20 and van den Berg (1998).
 - 23 See note 20.
 - 24 This 'explanation' was furnished in the foreword to the German edition, reprinted in the later English editions: see HWE: 482.
 - 25 See Ascheim (1997: 246), where he signalizes reactions to the book in the form of 'thinly veiled threats', reinforcing 'the view that many problematic, traditional German attitudes may remain in place, albeit under the surface'.
 - 26 See Lorenz (1997: ch. 13) for this argument.
 - 27 For an analysis of this type of inversion, see Lorenz (1998b, 1998c).
 - 28 This characterization of Goldhagens academic fate I owe to Jeffrey Herf. Manfred Hettlings conclusion that the debate on Goldhagens book is far more interesting than the book itself points in the same direction. See his review of Goldhagen in Hettlings (1997).

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