THE HOLOCAUST AND SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS*

Debra Renee Kaufman
Northeastern University
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The insights of feminist theory and methodology are used to explore ways in which some of the limitations of sociological study of the Holocaust might be overcome. It is argued that if feminist insights about limitations of sociological inquiry in general and of women, in particular, are made explicit it will be possible to study the Holocaust as other than solely a part of Jewish History and to move its study beyond a specialized niche within academia.

The first section explores some of the explanations for the dearth of sociological inquiry about the Holocaust. The second borrows from feminist epistemological critiques of science to suggest how some of the current obstacles to the sociological study of the Holocaust might be overcome. The third section addresses the ways in which a gender analysis of the Holocaust leads to new ways of asking old questions.

Langer (1982), in his study of the Holocaust, quotes Samuel Beckett's line in the *Endgame*, "I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent." I place the quote here for two reasons: 1) to note that historians, philosophers, psychologists, and literary scholars, such as Langer, have been far more active in studying the Holocaust than sociologists;[1] and 2) if current sociological "words" do not enable us to understand or explore the meaning of the Holocaust within sociological scholarship, then perhaps it is time that we teach ourselves new ones.

Current sociological "silences" about the Holocaust, stem, in part, from the limitations the epistemological foundations of science impose upon sociological discourse. Specifically, this article examines several sets of interrelated questions of importance both to feminists and to sociologists. In the first section, I explore explanations for the dearth of sociological inquiry into the Holocaust, with a major focus on Bauman's (1992) *Modernity and the Holocaust*. The second section borrows from feminist epistemological critiques of science to suggest how some of the current obstacles to the study of the Holocaust might be overcome.[2] In the third section, I look specifically at the issue of gender and the Holocaust as one way of addressing "sociological silences" and of exploring new ways of asking old questions.

SOME CURRENT EXPLANATIONS FOR THE LACK OF SOCIOLOGICAL HOLOCAUST RESEARCH

Sociologists frequently have several concerns about the study of the Holocaust. Some, myself included, feel ambivalent about embarking on such research. To use this cataclysmic event to potentially further our own careers seems unscrupulous, if not disrespectful. Others feel the language and discourse common to the social sciences (unlike philosophy, theology, literature and the arts) cannot capture the immensity of such a horrific event. Still others express concern about approaching the Holocaust from a scientific model, one stressing dispassion, disinterest, objectivity and value neutrality.[3] When such concerns are voiced, I find it helpful to note feminist critiques of science, especially those critiques which claim "a natural foundation for knowledge, not in detachment and distance, but in closeness, connectedness, and empathy" (Bordo, 1986: 263). I share a reluctance to approach the study of the Holocaust within what some feminists have labelled, "malestream" sociology, a sociology which, for the most part, still divides the world into oppositional categories within a dualistic, or what I call an either/or approach to knowledge. Bordo (1986: 263) notes, some feminists "find the failure of connection (rather than the blurring of boundaries) as the principle cause of a breakdown in understanding."

In a similar vein, Fein (1979) begins her widely acclaimed sociological investigation of the Holocaust by suggesting that despite the fact that the "essence and the entirety" of the Holocaust might be better understood through art,[4] "there is no intrinsic reason to assume that what we do not yet understand cannot be understood by reason" (Fein 1979: 5). Put another way, she believes that the Holocaust, like other monumental acts of violence and genocide, can and must be submitted to the rational process of social scientific inquiry. Ironically, Fein's faith in reason is turned on its head in Bauman's (1992) provocative thesis that modernity (and all that this implies about reason and scientific inquiry) was one of the most decisive factors in making the Holocaust possible.

In this article, I do not debate Bauman's (1992) thesis,[5] but do underscore the subtext of his book which mandates that to understand his views on modernity, we must engage in a critique of the "culture of science," and, by extension, a critique of sociology which models itself on science.[6] Bauman conjectures that, in at least two seemingly contradictory ways, the Holocaust provides a point of critical departure for rethinking the sociological understanding of civilization, progress and reason. For instance, if the Holocaust is investigated as an interruption in the "normal flow of history, a cancerous growth on the body of civilized society, a momentary madness among sanity" (Bauman 1992: viii), then it does not call for any "significant

revision of the orthodox understanding of the historical tendency of modernity, of the civilizing process, (or) of the constitutive topics of sociological inquiry " 1992: .2). Moreover, if the Holocaust is treated primarily as an event in Jewish history or the "collective (and sole) property of the Jews" (1992: viii), it then becomes "unique, comfortably uncharacteristic and (therefore) sociologically inconsequential (1992: 1)." If the Holocaust becomes a specialized topic in Jewish history, as, for instance, other specialized areas of investigation such as Women's studies, Judaic Studies or Hispanic Studies, it may then be sent to the margins of the discipline, understood as a "specialist industry left to its own scientific institutes, foundations and conference circuits" (1992: x), never fully a part of mainstream sociological inquiry and discourse and never reaching mainstream sociological audiences. "Eliminated," as Bauman (1992: xi) writes, from the "core canon of the discipline."[7] The process, of moving subjects to the margins will be discussed again when I discuss feminist critiques of the philosophy of science. Marginal placement leaves the center of a discipline comfortably intact.

Redefining the domain and processes of sociological inquiry will not come easily. Many will find the feminist challenge to discover different ways of describing human knowledge and its acquisition deeply disturbing. One highly respected sociologist reveals just how difficult it is to move beyond received understandings and what is considered "appropriate" for sociological investigation. In a personal communication to me, he writes:

> it may be argued that the Holocaust, a massive single (hopefully} event is not a subject for sociological inquiry. Rather it is one for historians, who have, in fact, written a myriad of books and hundreds, nay thousands, of articles on the subject, as have theologians. The latter take up some of the issues which concern you. If one considers the Holocaust as a unique extraordinary event, as I do, then it is not responsive to sociology inquiry, which seeks to generalize from case studies or deals with many cases or subjects.

In short, study of the Holocaust is outside the normal realm of sociology and should be left only to the historians, the theologians and the philosophers. I disagree that we accede to any preconceived limitations on what we can and cannot know sociologically about the Holocaust. So does Prosono (1994) in his speculations about the consequences of placing the Holocaust beyond sociological imagination or understanding. Sociology can place this cataclysmic event within socio-historic time and can give recognizable categories of human experience with which to analyze it. Noted Holocaust writer Applefeld (1994a, 1995b) forcefully denies that the Holocaust is ungraspable, unknowable or unimaginable. On the contrary, he argues that we must bring language and imagination to this terrible event in

order that we name it and think about it in recognizable categories of human experience. The feminist stance also demands that we think about experience in recognizable categories. However, feminism insists on including categories recognizable to those whose experiences are not reflected in mainstream thinking. One possible consequence of such rethinking is an expanded language to reflect and understand both personal and social history.

Sociologists' reluctance to study the Holocaust stems from more than the uniqueness of the subject matter. There is also the troubling issue of how to conduct such sociological inquiry in a value-free or "objective" manner. In his personal communication to me, my highly regarded fellow sociologist reveals yet another deeply ingrained assumption about both method and objectivity within the social sciences when he writes about Weber. He claims:

> Weber . . . emphasized that every scholar had a party line, his very term, which could be related to politics, status and role, including presumably gender, and theoretical orientation. And Weber concluded that scholars could not trust their own findings or conclusions if these coincided with their party line. He said if you challenged your assumptions, the results were probably right, if they agreed, you should redo them and if possible expose them to replication and challenge by others (personal communication).

The scientific underpinnings inherent in this particular view of sociology are clear and rather uncompromising. Unique events do not belong within the sociological purview. Findings, as in all the sciences, must be subject to replication and every attempt should be made to realize the ideal of "objectivity." Such an approach to research and thinking separates method from theory. Considered value-free, the scientific method, unlike the researcher or even his or her theories, is untainted. Politics, status, role, theoretical orientation, or gender, cannot, in this so-called value-free model, taint what we choose to measure, whom we use as respondents or subjects, what measures we use, or what questions we ask. Feminist sociologists find this an "unenlightened" position.[8] Weber, I believe, understood full well that sociology was not, except in the most "ideal" sense, a value-free discipline. As a product of his time, it would have been impossible for Weber to understand that perhaps sociology's failure as a "hard" science might someday prove to be its virtue, not its weakness. That day has yet to be acknowledged, for despite the different schools of thought (see: Kaufman 1990), the search for universal principles within a scientific epistemological framework still dominates the field of sociology. Therefore, until we rethink our epistemological foundations within a framework that can capture both the unique and the universal within our investigations, if not our imag-

inations, mainstream sociological categories that deal with genocide, ethnic, cultural, and racial oppression are not, as Bauman fears, capable of capturing what is unique about the Holocaust.

Bauman observes that there is nothing in the rules of instrumental rationality that would have prevented the Holocaust from happening. Indeed, he suggests that (Bauman 1992: 17), "At no point of its long and tortuous execution did the Holocaust come in conflict with the principles of rationality." Moreover, he observes that although Holocaust-style phenomena are not an inevitable or necessary response to modern bureaucracy or the culture of instrumental rationality, the rules of instrumental rationality are incapable of preventing such phenomena. Incapable, because they have been artificially separated from the ethical consequences of their "daily problem-solving activity" (Bauman 1992: 29). Therefore, for example, it was possible for many German bureaucrats to distance themselves from the moral responsibility of their everyday problem-solving activities by never leaving their bureaucratic positions, by never even leaving their desks, that is, by killing Jews through orders, telephone calls, or the arranging of transports (Bauman, 1992).

Parsons, in his 1942 presidential address to the Eastern Sociological Society (cited in Gerhardt, 1993: 212), foreshadows some of the issues raised by Bauman. He writes:

> this rationalistic scheme of thought . . . has been guilty of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness in neglecting or underestimating the role of what Pareto has called the "non-logical" aspects of human behavior in society, of the sentiments and traditions of family and informal social relationships, of the refinements of social stratification, of the peculiarities of regional, ethnic or national culture—perhaps above all of religion.

Underestimating the role of "non-logical" aspects of human behavior, of sentiment and tradition, of informal sets of relationships, stems, I believe, in part, from rigid distinctions that exist theoretically in our analyses of social structure and organization, but not necessarily empirically. For instance, by locating our primary focus on formal relationships within bureaucratic settings, early work on the occupations and professions missed the informal dynamics which were critical in understanding power relationships and gender differences in achievement within those work settings (see especially: Epstein 1970 and Kaufman 1978). By underestimating the role of race, gender, ethnicity, and religion in our analyses, as most feminists unceasingly caution, we often create categories which neglect (and are therefore inadequate) to reflect not only personal experiences but a more encompassing socio-historic experience as well. Such rethinking adjusts our

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Therefore, the answer to Bauman's question: Why haven't sociologists been more cognizant of the potentially destructive possibilities of instrumental rationality, is meant to be quite unsettling. Any rewriting of the theories of modernity, rationality and the civilizing process, writes Bauman, would require a change in sociology itself and, I would add, in some of its epistemological assumptions. As he (1992: 29) states:

> sociology promoted, as its own criteria of propriety, the same principles of rational action it visualized as constitutive of its object. It also promoted, as binding rules of its own discourse, the inadmissibility of ethical problematics in any other form but that of a communally-sustained ideology and thus heterogeneous to sociological (scientific, rational) discourse.

The task of rethinking sociological concepts is daunting. Bauman's concern is that sociology, as an objective science, has a self-imposed moral silence. He asks: "What kind of a medical school trained Mengele and his associates? What departments of anthropology prepared the staff of Strasbourg University's 'Institute of Ancestral Heredity'?" (1992:29). After he notes that sociology has dismissed from its own discourse the "admissibility of ethical problematics," he notes (1992: 29), "Phrases like 'the sanctity of human life' or 'moral duty' sound as alien in a sociology seminar as they do in the smoke-free, sanitized rooms of a bureaucratic office."

FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL ENTERPRISE

In a point he attributes to Nechama Tec, Bauman (1992) suggests that the question facing sociologists is not so much what they have to say about the Holocaust, but rather what the Holocaust has to say about sociology. I believe feminist epistemological debates, within and outside of sociology, may help to frame an answer. A feminist "revisioning" of sociology demands the rethinking of often artificial dichotomies at the base of contemporary social theory, those which demand a rigid separation between moral and rational pursuits, between the observer and the observed, between the particular and the universal, and between the political and the academic.

Feminist scholarship has made us aware that a discipline's definition of its subject matter is not without problems. Moving beyond claims that women's lives, experiences, voices, work and attitudes were tacitly rendered invisible in sociological research, pedagogy and scholarship, current feminist critical theory addresses the gendered nature of the construction of knowledge and the methods employed to understand and describe it.

Bauman's worry about the separation of ethical concerns from the rational pursuit of sociological inquiry is echoed by Martin (1988: 138), a feminist philosopher, in her claim that science has an inescapable ethical dimension. However, just as Bauman is concerned that the Holocaust might become a specialized area of investigation, Martin worries that the study of the ethical dimensions of the philosophy of science will be shunted into a less visible and/or ghettoized area of the discipline; marginal, as Bauman (1992: 7) noted about sociology, "to the core canon of the discipline."

While feminist critique begins as a gender analysis of the social and political dimensions of the discipline, it does not end there. Similar to Bauman's analysis, feminist critics have argued that the culture of science privileges rationality and objectivity[9] and that it has separated itself from "ethical problematics." However, feminist theory, as critical theory, parts company with other positivist critics, such as phenomenologists, symbolic interactionists, ethnomethodologists, structuralists and deconstructionists within sociology in that it clearly states its emancipatory claims about women. It makes clear that the sexual division of labor has real consequences for the structure of knowledge. Significantly, while it addresses the Cartesian subject/object dichotomy and other binaries which are a part of the natural science model, many feminists do not necessarily distance themselves from what they are studying. They worry about abstracting persons from time and place. They try not to develop theories of knowledge which, as feminist philosopher, Code (1988:187) suggests, "leave experience behind in a search for an epistemic ideal of unrealizable clarity." Feminists want theoretical accounts which retain a continuity with experience.

In her work on moral development, Gilligan (1983) provides a good example of the ways in which her methodology allows her to connect theory and women's experiences. Code (1988: 196) points to the significance of such an approach when she writes:

> There is an evident concern, in her work, to maintain contact with, and derive insights from, accounts that not only arise out of experience and are firmly grounded in it, but that stay in touch with that experience in drawing their conclusions. This contrasts with methods of epistemological and moral theory construction that aim to transcend experience, . . . at the expense, I believe, of the insight and understanding that a maintained continuity with experience can afford (Code 1988:196).

Code lauds Gilligan's methodology and its use of narrative as a way of bringing women's voices into the construct of knowledge. She argues that while the stories told to researchers need not be, in any sense, truer, less mediated or more reliable than other sources of data, such

> stories convey something about cognitive and moral experiences, in their manifold manifestations, that slips through the formalist net of moral principles and duties, or standards of evidence and justification (Code 1988:199).

GENDER AND THE HOLOCAUST

I conclude with some comments about the relationship of feminist theories of knowledge and the Holocaust by focusing on Ringelheim's (1993, 1995) work. While feminist critical insights lead us well beyond issues of sexism, work that addresses sexism is often the initial way in which gender becomes a part of scholarly inquiry. Interestingly, while Bauman raises our consciousness about racism and the Holocaust, very little has been written about sexism and the Holocaust. In one of the few volumes on the topic, Rittner and Roth (1993) raise important issues in their prologue. They write (1993: 2):

> Sexism, which divides social roles according to biological functions, can exist without racism, but whenever claims are made that one race is superior to any or all others, discrimination directed at women is unlikely to be far behind.

Moreover, Rittner and Roth (1993: 4) make clear that the focus on women might open new or, at least, different questions for study, questions not just about women, but about every human "who had to endure the Holocaust's darkness."

Political interest and knowledge are never separate when we choose the subject matter or the models and the methods of our scholarly inquiry. Indeed, objections to the introduction of sexism into Holocaust research represent political fears that a focus on sexism might have the unintended effect of reducing the Holocaust to "just" an example of sexism or may detract from the "real" issue of anti-Semitism. Rittner and Roth (1993: 4) offer the following counter to these fears:

> Precisely because the Nazis targeted Jews and others in racial terms, they had to see those victims in their male and female particularity. Far from reducing the Shoah to an example of sexism, emphasis on what happened to women reveals what otherwise would remain hidden: a fuller picture of the unprecedented and unrelenting killing that the "Final Solution's" anti-Semitism and racism entailed.

Others worry that potentially conflicting stories or differences about the Holocaust could result in feeding the flames of Holocaust denial. However, as Prosono (1994) suggests, there is a difference between posing questions about the details of the Holocaust, and I would add about male and female differences, and questioning whether the Holocaust happened.

Given such concerns, Ringelheim (1993) begins her discussion of women and the Holocaust by arguing that her purpose is not to pit men's suffering against women's, but rather to explore what feminist theory opens to inquiry, as the title of Goldenberg's (1990) essay puts it: "different horrors, same hell" that women experienced in the Holocaust given their gender. As Rittner and Roth (1993: 3) contend:

> Even though no book about the Holocaust has been more widely read than the diary of Anne Frank, most of the best-known accounts of the Holocaust tend to be by men—from survivors such as Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel to scholars such as Yehuda Bauer and Raul Hilberg and philosophical and religious interpreters such as Emil Fackenheim and Richard Rubenstein.

Ringelheim addresses this imbalance by using narratives to gather her data about women and the Holocaust. She integrates these women's narratives into the "metastory" about sexism she wishes to tell and, by so doing, augments the larger story about our understanding of the Holocaust. She (Ringelheim 1995: 16) writes:

> The Nazis specifically legitimated the murder of women and children because it was central to the race struggle. Women were not simply Jews, they were Jewish women . . . . The documents clearly reveal that women were often the largest population available for the killing operations against the Jews.

Ringelheim claims we must come to grips with these frightening statistics even if it feels as if it is "too much for our memories." She argues (1995:14-15) that significant aspects of the Holocaust may be missed if we do not develop a "language" or a "place for the memory" of the experiences of women. For instance, one respondent tells Ringelheim of sexual abuse by a number of gentile men while she was in hiding. She ends her story this way: "it was not important . . . except to me" (1993: 377). Why should sexual abuse have no place in the story of the Holocaust? Are women's experiences, as women, too trivial? The testimonies and naratives found in Rittner and Roth's edited volume leave us numb as we learn of rape and other sexual violence committed against women in the camps and in the "hospitals." Painfully, women who were pregnant and/or who served as "nurses" or "medical assistants" speak of enforced abortions and, in some cases, of the necessity of killing their own and other women's infants. The use of narratives such as these point to the need for a fuller and more complete set of experiences before theories about the Holocaust construct them (to paraphrase, Smith, 1974).

Ringelheim uses women's narratives as a way of understanding women's experiences from the "standpoint of women." She is never too far from her subjects. The telling of the victims' stories is not necessarily meant to claim

an "absolute status as the oppressed," but rather to provoke debate about the way in which harm and the perception of harm are socially created (see McCloskey, 1994: 56). "Male memory," claims a Holocaust survivor, "can confront women as victims, but cannot confront male oppression" (Ringelheim, 1995:11).

If the study of the Holocaust is more than a part of Jewish history and is to move beyond a specialized niche within academia, feminist insights about the limitations of sociological investigations, in general, and of women in particular, must be made explicit. Investigations such as Bauman's that freely admit that rationalism and objectivity are not sufficient analytical tools, because the Holocaust proceeded right through and, perhaps, even because of them, encourage us to seek new or, at least, revised concepts and methods to guide our sociological inquiry. Feminism's approach to the study of women makes obvious the dilemma or paradox of sociology's mimetic relationship to its subject. Feminism's approach to the study of women makes obvious the sociological limitations for the study of the Holocaust and suggests ways of overcoming such limitations.

NOTES

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[1] Indeed, with only a few notable exceptions sociologists have been conspicuously absent. Fein 1979, Porter 1993 and Prosono 1994 also make this point)

[2] The relationship of feminism to other critical theories is developed more fully in Kaufman (1990).

[3] See especially Lipstadt (1994) in a compelling argument against the posing of the Holocaust as an event eligible for debate in our "culture of critique."

[4] Although note that Langer (1975: xii) wonders whether the "artistic vision of the literary intelligence could ever devise a technique and form adequate to convey what the concentration camp experience implied for the contemporary mind." He also notes (1975: xii):

> the uniqueness of the experience of the Holocaust may be arguable, but beyond dispute is the fact that many writers perceived it as unique, and began with the premise that they were working with raw materials unprecedented in the literature of history and the history of literature. . . . At a time when technology threatens more and more to silence the rich resources of language, it seems singularly appropriate, and perhaps even urgent, to explore ways in which the writer has devised an idiom and a style for the unspeakable, and particularly the unspeakable horrors at the heart of the Holocaust experience.

[5] Indeed, my focus on Bauman (1992) perhaps raises more problems than it answers. However, my focus is not on Bauman's treatment of the Holocaust and modernity, but rather on his very important focus on the ways in which we make "truth claims" as social scientists.

[6] It should be noted that the link between the paucity of sociological Holocaust research and the epistemological underpinnings of the model of the natural sciences seems on the face of it evidently

true since the bulk of Holocaust research has been done in the humanities. However, psychology and, increasingly, political science, deserve some attention as exceptions. I would argue that the "humanistic" subfields in the social sciences are the more likely locations for such research.

[7] Bauman (1992: xi) notes:

> It remains then little affected by the concerns and discoveries of the new specialists, and soon also by the peculiar language and imagery they develop. More often than not, the branching off means that the scholarly interests delegated to specialist institutions are thereby eliminated from the core canon of the discipline; they are, so to speak, particularized and marginalized, deprived in practice, if not necessarily in theory, of more general significance; thus mainstream scholarship is absolved from further preoccupation with them.

[8] In this article I cannot adequately explore this topic. However for a particularly fine analysis of feminist research methodology see Reinharz (1992). For an analysis of the links between feminist theory and methodology, see Kaufman (1990). I am not speaking exclusively of qualitative methods, for instance, see also, Smith, (1994).

[9] Some of the leading feminist critics of science and the philosophy of science move beyond Bauman when they note that trends in modern science universalize on the basis of limited perspectives (Nicholson, 1990). Nicholson (1990: 2) observes that the dominant trends in contemporary academic scholarship have been marked by all encompassing universal principles which are meant to reveal the basic features of both natural and social reality. The key to the modernist method of inquiry is that reason, or what Nicholson calls "transcendent reason," is able to separate itself from the body and from historical time and place. The scholarly ideal of "transcendent reason" has been maintained in the social sciences through its allegiance to the norms of objectivity (Harding 1986, 1987).

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