‘And we are grey’: Primo Levi and the ontology of survival

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I refer to Primo Levi’s *The Drowned and The Saved*, where he claims that the survivors ‘did not touch the bottom.’ I argue that this assumption means not only that something did not happen to the survivors, but also that, since the conditions in the camp were so extreme that one could only remain alive in other man’s shoes, the experiences of those who did touch the bottom inevitably inhabit as a lack, a radical enigma, the very existence of those who survived. As Timothy Snyder puts it, there is ‘a disjuncture between history and memory,’ and the hypothesis here is that in part this disjuncture derives from the fact that what can be remembered is necessarily affected by the survivor’s ontological condition.

Introduction

This article is primarily an attempt to provide a philosophical approach to the Holocaust. I would like to make some preliminary remarks on what I call the ontology of survival. In other words, the central question is what surviving is.

In order to try to answer it, I will particularly refer to Primo Levi’s last book, *The Drowned and The Saved*, where he claims that he – and, for that matter, almost all the survivors – ‘did not touch the bottom,’ that is to say, did not experience the most radical implications of the Holocaust. I will argue that this assumption means not only that something did not happen to the survivors, but also that, since the conditions in the camp were so extreme that one could only
remain alive in other man’s shoes, the experiences of those who did touch the bottom inevitably inhabit – as lack, a radical enigma, a totally dark room – the experiences of those who survived.

The ontology of survival, as I would additionally argue, has consequences to the construction of postwar discourses on the Holocaust. As Timothy Snyder puts it, there is ‘a disjuncture between history and memory,’¹ and the hypothesis here is that in part this disjuncture derives from the fact that what can be remembered is necessarily affected by the survivor’s dislocated existence.

Primo Levi’s work is paradoxical in this regard. On the one hand, it reiterates the limits of the survivor’s memories; on the other hand, it increasingly manifests a profound awareness of the exceptionality of the survivor’s ontological condition. For sure, he cannot bridge the structural lack that is embedded in his soul: he cannot die as the drowned died. Nevertheless, he knows well his experience in Auschwitz was, in his own terms, ‘grey.’ He knows well that this greyness is surrounded by darker zones that lead to total darkness. He knows well where these darker zones begin – inside him, as it were – but, by definition, he cannot not know in advance where they end. In this sense, his writings constitute a critique of memory as well as an invitation for us to explore the darker regions of the Holocaust.

**The degradation**

January 1945. The Red Army resolutely marches on the Polish territory. The Soviet troops are extremely close to Auschwitz. Hopelessly surrounded by them, the Germans decide to run away towards the West, not without destroying the facilities of the camp.
Before leaving Auschwitz, the SS gathers all the prisoners able to walk and forces them to go to the West too. The idea is to lead them to another camp in order to explore their labor power to the last drop. The sickest inmates are left behind, condemned to live by themselves in the infirmary. Infected with scarlet fever, Primo Levi is among those moribund.

On 20 January 1945, despite pain and weakness, he and Charles, a French peer, get out of bed to empty the latrine and bury an inmate – ‘the Somogyi thing’ – who had died the night before. It is If This is a Man’s final scene:

The Russians arrived when Charles and I were carrying Sómogyi a little distance outside. He was very light. We overturned the stretcher in the grey snow.

Charles took off his beret. I regretted not having a beret.

Of the eleven of the Infektionsabteilung, Somógyi was the only one to die in the ten days. Sertelet, Cagnolati, Towarowski, Lamaker and Dorget (I have not spoken of him so far; he was a French industrialist who, after an operation for peritonitis, fell ill of nasal diphtheria) died some weeks later in the temporary Russian hospital of Auschwitz. In April, at Katowice, I met Schenck and Alacalai in good health. Arthur has reached his family happily and Charles has taken up his teacher’s profession again; we have exchanged long letters, and I hope to see him again one day.²

The most impressive aspect of the excerpt is the fact that the arrival of the Soviets is mentioned in passing, as if it were an event like any other. Forty years later, in The Drowned and the Saved, Primo Levi recollects the moment he saw the Russian soldiers. We eventually
understand why he once described the liberation of the camp so discreetly. It was not a happy ending. Instead, the dominant feeling among the inmates was shame:

Coming out of the darkness, one suffered because of the reacquired consciousness of having been diminished. Not by our will, cowardice, or fault, yet nevertheless we had lived for months and years at an animal level: our days had been encumbered from dawn to dusk by hunger, fatigue, cold, and fear, and any space for reflection, reasoning, experiencing emotions was wiped out. We endured filth, promiscuity, and destitution, suffering much less than we would have suffered from such things in normal life, because our moral yardstick had changed.  

Here we face one of Primo Levi’s obsessive themes: the degradation the prisoners were submitted to. In fact, this is essentially what *If This is a Man* is about. However, it is important to add that, for Levi, it is impossible to address the degradation directly. As the passage above clearly reveals, the full conscience of what happened to the deportees is inevitably retrospective, in a sense similar to Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*. It is triggered by liberation, that is to say, at the very moment when the prisoner emerges from obscurity and ‘can be unhappy in the manner of free man.’ 

In assuming this ‘afterwardness,’ Levi obviously recognizes ‘[t]he lacuna between our knowledge of what happened in the Nazi genocide and the very happening of it,’ which implies ‘that a certain facticity always slides away, resists cognition.’ Yet, Primo Levi also has in mind a much more radical and consequential implication of the fact that the memory of the Holocaust
is the memory of the survivor. The gap between, on the one hand, what the survivor can report and, on the other hand, what happened is not only cognitive in nature, but also ontological. The following sections are dedicated to explaining and justifying this claim.

**The bottom and beyond it**

‘To touch the bottom:’ in *If This is a Man*, those were the terms used by Primo Levi in order to depict his arrival in Auschwitz. As soon as he presents this metaphor, he unzips it as it follows:

It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find in ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains.⁷

Nevertheless, the idea that he is at the lowest level one can reach coexists with another one, in some sense symmetrical to the former: the realization that there is something beyond the bottom, a place even more absurd – a condition that Primo Levi has not reached (yet). This point beyond the bottom is invoked in the book for the first time by means of the night metaphor:
In less than ten minutes all the fit men had been collected together in a group. What happened to the others, to the women, to the children, to the old men, we could establish neither then nor later: the night swallowed them up, purely and simply.⁸

Many excerpts of If This is a Man reassure that the author is well aware of the fact that there is an experience of destruction that he has not lived (yet), that a discontinuity intervenes between himself and people such as a completely reified inmate simply known as Null Achtzehn, ‘Zero Eighteen, the last three figures of his entry number:’

I think that even he has forgotten his name, certainly he acts as if this was so. When he speaks, when he looks around, he gives the impression of being empty inside, nothing more than an involucre, like the slough of certain insects which one finds on the banks of swamps, held by a thread to the stones and shaken by the wind. [...] He is indifferent to the point of not even troubling to avoid tiredness and blows or to search for food. He carries out all the orders that he is given, and it is foreseeable that when they send him to his death he will go with the same total indifference.⁹

Null Achtzehn is not alone in his condition. He is just a specimen of a different species – the Muslims, the mob in the camp:
Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the Muselmänner, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer.\(^\text{10}\)

It is important to notice, additionally, that Levi also glimpses a world in some sense above him – the universe of the privileged:

We are once again at the foot of the pile. Mischa and the Galician lift a support and put it roughly on our shoulders. Their job is the least tiring, so that they show excess zeal to keep it: they shout at companions who dawdle, they incite them, they admonish them, they drive on the work at an unbearable pace. This fills me with anger, although I already know that it is in the normal order of things that the privileged oppress the unprivileged: the social structure of the camp is based on this human law.\(^\text{11}\)

To a great extent, *If This is a Man* is the development of a dialectics that links and opposes the idea that the victims can be taken as a unity to the idea that this unity is fractured into many pieces.

In *The Drowned and The Saved*, published in 1986, Levi presents the most mature version of this dialectics. As we shall see, this late reasoning on the sociological and anthropological complexity of the camp is based upon the notion of ‘grey zone,’ which Marion Baird defines ‘very provisionally… as the symbolization of the moral compromise that many desperate prisoners were forced to make in order to buy themselves more time.’\(^\text{12}\)
Very provisionally: the concept is uncertain. The path to its definition is winding, subtle. Next, I will try to clarify as much as possible what Primo Levi means by ‘grey zone.’

**The grey zone**

In a well-known poem called ‘On Exactitude in Science,’ Jorge Luis Borges tells the story of a group of cartographers who work for the Emperor. They were so engaged in the task of providing a perfect map of the Empire that, at the end of the day, what was offered was a replica of the Empire in all its details. Now, a map that reiterates the complexity and the opaqueness of reality is perfectly useless: we were so perplexed before it as we would be before reality itself. In trying to describe and understand the world, we inevitably fall in some oversimplification. As John Austin put it, ‘[o]versimplification is the occupational disease of philosophers, if it were not his occupation.’ 13 An assumption very similar to this – expressed almost in the same terms – is posed by Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved*: ‘What we commonly mean by “understand” coincides with “simplify’”.14 This will to simplification is not a contingent drive: its origins, Primo Levi writes, are deeply rooted in the very structure of language and conceptual thinking. In any case, it is one thing to say that we are condemned to a certain amount of oversimplification, it is another to derive a relativistic conclusion from this fact: ‘this desire for simplification is justified, but the same does not always apply to simplification itself.’15 Primo Levi is particularly interested in historical phenomena, which, he says, ‘are not simple, or not simple in the way that we would like.’ His aim is to put in perspective each and every attempt ‘to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels-we-and-they.’16
Despite usual sentimentality and all forms of Manicheism, not even the death camps can be divided into rigid blocks of victims and perpetrators:

Only a schematic rhetoric can claim that that space is empty: it never is; it is studded with obscene or pathetic figures (sometimes they possess both qualities simultaneously), whom it is indispensable to know if we want to know the human species, if we want to know how to defend our souls when a similar test should once more loom before us, or even if we only want to understand what takes place in a big industrial factory.\textsuperscript{17}

In addressing this intermediary region between victims and executioners, Levi’s starting point is the set of functionaries-prisoners, a relatively small group of individuals to whom, in exchange for some privileges, a number of tasks in the camp routine were assigned by the Nazis. Yet, the Italian writer immediately realizes that he is dealing with an extremely heterogeneous class. It ranges from the Kapos – bosses often voluntarily aggressive and harmful – to the “picturesque fauna” of sweepers, kettle washers, night watchmen, bed smoothers, checkers of lice and scabies, messengers, interpreters, assistants’ assistants. About the latter, Primo Levi observes:

In general, they were poor devils like ourselves, who worked full time like everyone else but who for an extra half-liter of soup were willing to carry out these and other "tertiary" functions [...] Their privilege, which at any rate entailed supplementary hardships and efforts, gained them very little and did not spare them from the discipline and suffering
of everyone else; their hope for life was substantially the same as that of the unprivileged. They were coarse and arrogant, but they were not regarded as enemies.¹⁸

‘If I were forced to judge,’ Primo Levi goes on, ‘I would lightheartedly absolve [them].’ Nevertheless, the same cannot be said about Kapos and other inmates designated to higher and consequential positions: in those cases, ‘judgement becomes more tentative and varied,’ which, anyway, does not mean pure and simple condemnation. Let us consider below the reasons for this caveat.

What Primo Levi mainly has in mind is the fact that in the Lager scarcity was so extreme that ‘it was very difficult to escape the almost inevitable taint of moral ambiguity for the simple fact that his or her survival was often predicated on harm (or worse, the death) of another.’¹⁹ In his own formula,

In fact, even apart from the hard labor, the beatings, the cold, and the illnesses, the food ration was decisively insufficient for even the most frugal prisoner: the physiological reserves of the organism were consumed in two or three months, and death by hunger, or by diseases induced by hunger, was the prisoner's normal destiny, avoidable only with additional food. Obtaining that extra nourishment required a privilege-large or small, granted or conquered, astute or violent, licit or illicit-whatever it took to lift oneself above the norm.²⁰
As Gordon notes, Justice, despite its complexity and subtleties, inevitably leads to ‘a binary epistemology’: the judges’ ultimate task is ‘to answer a single, yes-no question: guilty or innocent.’ In other words, the act of judging ‘in the sense, of careful, nuanced, and sensitive understanding is, at least in the endpoint of the process, discarded in favor of formal justice.’

This idea of Justice as a ‘procedural output,’ nevertheless, does not apply to the Lager insofar as, to begin with, ‘one of the aims of the Nazis was to confuse the two [innocence and guilt].’

For Levi, this confusion willingly produced does not mean that the condition of the offended ‘excludes culpability.’ Instead, he concludes that any judgement must proceed case to case, considered the extenuating circumstances and, above all, the fact that ‘the greatest responsibility lies with the system.’ The matter is so delicate that regular judges and jury should keep distance from it: ‘it is necessary to declare the imprudence of issuing hasty moral judgment on such human cases… It is a judgment that we would like to entrust only to those who found themselves in similar circumstances and had the opportunity to test for themselves what it means to act in a state of coercion.’

The framework established by Primo Levi is actually even more intricate. In a crucial passage of The Drowned and the Saved, he mentions the arrival of the new prisoners, calling attention to the fact that, in those occasions, the multifarious army of functionaries-prisoners intersected and, to a certain extent, merged with the gigantic population of regular prisoners. Before the newcomers, the “friendly fire” was not only shot by the people overtly summoned by the Nazis. The veterans as a whole were distant and cold, if not hostile or violent: ‘the despised crowd of seniors was prone to recognize in the new arrival a target on which to vent its humiliation, to find compensation at his expense, to build for itself and at his expense a figure of a lower rank on whom to discharge the burden of the offenses received from above.’
So is the grey zone: a realm largely imposed by the conditions of the Lager and permeable to the point of being always able to incorporate each and every prisoner, including Primo Levi. The author, after all, is fully aware of the fact that he not only survived but prevented from being caught by the grey zone due, to some extent, to circumstances completely unrelated to his will. In his favor, as he well knows, there was a lot of luck – if we can call it that – and other unexpected eventualities, such as having received extra food from an Italian worker who was at a labor camp in Auschwitz or having worked in conditions a little less strenuous after his admission as a chemist in the camp rubber factory. Primo Levi also well knows that, if it is true that he did not slip into the grey zone, it is also true that he cannot be counted among the best, the morally strongest.26

The ‘saved’ of the Lager were not the best, those predestined to do good, the bearers of a message: what I had seen and lived through proved the exact contrary. Preferably the worst survived, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the “grey zone,” the spies. It was not a certain rule (there were none, nor are there certain rules in human matters), but it was nevertheless a rule. I felt innocent, yes, but enrolled among the saved and therefore in permanent search of a justification in my own eyes and those of others. The worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all died.27

The Muslims
A specter, therefore, haunts Primo Levi’s memories: the specter who continuously tells him that he was never far enough from the grey zone. But this is not the only ghost on the scene: another one – the ghost of the Muslim - also insinuates itself all the time in the author’s writing.

Homer notes that the Holocaust has taught Primo Levi ‘the urgency of understanding oneself as integrally connected with the others.’28 He is right. But it could be added that, in the case of the drowned, this connection takes a dramatically singular form. An excerpt from If This is a Man helps us clarify this singularity:

Instead, two groups of strange individuals emerged into the light of the lamps. They walked in squads, in rows of three, with an odd, embarrassed step, head dangling in front, arms rigid. On their heads they wore comic berets and were all dressed in long striped overcoats, which even by night and from a distance looked filthy and in rags. They walked in a large circle around us, never drawing near, and in silence began to busy themselves with our luggage and to climb in and out of the empty wagons.

We looked at each other without a word. It was all incomprehensible and mad, but one thing we had understood. This was the metamorphosis that awaited us. Tomorrow we would be like them. 29

The passage encapsulates a kind of symmetrical version of what Lacan calls the mirror state:30 what Levi and the other newcomers see is not, as the French psychoanalyst puts it, their image as whole integrity but, on the contrary, the prefiguration of their own destruction and fragmentation. In any case, as it happens in the mirror stage, this apparition is not external to the subject. Rather, it is formative, immanent. From that moment on, it constitutes the very structure
of Levi’s self, as something he will carry within himself, even if he himself has not been converted into a Muslim, even if destruction has not reached him entirely yet.

Some pages above, we referred to the role played by the bottom metaphor in *If This is a Man*. Four decades later, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi returns to it in order to – surprisingly – deviate its original sense and, as a matter of fact, take the opposite road: “I did not touch the bottom”, he confesses this time. Considering all that was said about the nature of his relationship to the grey zone and to the Muslims, we are able to understand what this sea-change means: it means that Levi remained halfway between the grey zone and the Muslims. However, as I was trying to argue, this place is not simply the negation of the others but also, and above all, the inexhaustible possibility of being swallowed up by one of the two poles. Levi, so to speak, remains forever trapped between a coming-to-be-grey and a coming-to-be-Muslim, as if the two experiences – that of the traitor, and that of the total victim - could not be excluded from his own experience. He cannot know anything about them but, at the same time, he cannot keep distance from them. Both inhabit – as lack, as enigma, as total dark room – his very soul.

In a touching commentary on the Italian writer’s work, Baird asserts that, from the prisoner’s point of view, Auschwitz was an ‘immanent universe that seeks to torment its ‘guiltless victims’ by denying them “even the solace of innocence”’. In an even more precise formula – more precise in the sense that it is less affected by the binary epistemology involved in moral judgements – what was so brutally taken away from the prisoners was ‘the transparency of their innocence.’ Instead of transparency, a bit of opaqueness: a shade of grey is inevitably assigned to the survivor’s experience, even if he did not properly succumb to the grey zone. In the camp, one always survives at the expense of another who dies. This is so dramatically true that it imposes itself even when the prisoner does not take any action, simply as a result of the
fact that there were selections (selections are, by definition, selections of some over others). In any case, strictly following the veto that Primo Levi issued on the possibility of an external trial of the prisoners, what matters here is not the burdens or moral implications of this condition, but its purely ontological consequences.

Speaking of the American Civil War, Walt Whitman wrote: ‘Think how much, and of importance, will be—how much, civic and military, has already been—buried in the grave, in eternal darkness.’ These words could apply to the Lager as long as an addendum is added: in the Nazi camps the graveyards are the very bodies of the survivors. The experiences lived by the other – by those who died in the survivor’s shoes – are inscribed as a lacuna, a lack, in the saved. As Hatley puts it, witnessing, in this sense, is something one suffers.\(^{32}\)

When we talk about the Holocaust, we often talk about its excessiveness, its horrendous brutality, and it is obviously fair enough to do so. Very commonly, in addition, this excessiveness is linked to an impossibility of expression. This is what Dantziger calls the \textit{topos} of the unspeakable.\(^{33}\) Primo Levi himself occasionally embraces this idea:

\begin{quote}
When we finish, everyone remains in his own corner and we do not dare lift our eyes to look at one another. There is nowhere to look in a mirror, but our appearance stands in front of us, reflected in a hundred livid faces, in a hundred miserable and sordid puppets. We are transformed into the phantoms glimpsed yesterday evening.

Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man.\(^{34}\)
\end{quote}
Yet, another excerpt of the book suggests that, as hard as it may seem, the *topos* of the unspeakable ultimately belongs to a somewhat optimistic point of view, insofar as it makes us dream of a happy correspondence between words and even the most atrocious experiences:

Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say “hunger,” we say “tiredness,” “fear,” “pain,” we say “winter” and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one’s body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing nearer. 35

Much more radical and disturbing is another trend manifested in Levi’s work, according to which the very opposite of excessiveness – a lack – must be recognized in the very heart of the survivor’s experience and, therefore, in the very heart of everything he can report on the Holocaust. In this last case, the gap between words and things is unbridgeable by ontological reasons.

In *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud speaks of catharsis as a means of delivering the subject from the weight of the past. Nevertheless, how could one respond to something that did not happen to oneself but inhabits what happened to oneself as an indecipherable enigma?

Following Phillipe, I argue that this non-event which constitutes what happened to survivors is referred to in surprising ways in Levi’s writings. The commentator begins by
emphasizing the fact that, in the preface to *If This is a Man*, Levi apologizes for the ‘structural flaws’ of the book – its lacunae and inconsistencies. For Philippe, these somewhat fragmentary and hesitant elements – even more than Levi’s ever-mentioned detachment and clarity – ‘may be the most telling anthropologically.’ They would symbolize the presence of (of the absence of) the drowned, ‘for they reveal that the survival of humanity is a communal experience rather than individual matter.’ 36

Perhaps, it is no accident that a non-event is one of the first things reported by Levi in *If This is a Man*’s narrative, right after his arrival in the camp:

We climb down, they make us enter an enormous empty room that is poorly heated. We have a terrible thirst. The weak gurgle of the water in the radiators makes us ferocious; we have had nothing to drink for four days. But there is also a tap and above it a card which says that it is forbidden to drink as the water is dirty… This is hell. Today, in our times, hell must be like this. A huge, empty room: we are tired, standing on our feet, with a tap which drips while we cannot drink the water, and we wait for something which will certainly be terrible, and nothing happens and nothing continues to happen. 37

In the next sessions – maybe the riskiest in this essay –, I will attempt to link Levi’s work to Snyder’s remarks on the disjuncture between history and memory, ‘the divergences between what we know – or perhaps ought to know – about history and the way this particular history is remembered.’ 38

Snyder’s interpretation of the Holocaust
Yale Professor Timothy Snyder is one of the most respected and daring contemporary historians of the Holocaust. His approach to the subject poses a challenge to some of the most deeply held beliefs about the Extermination of the European Jews. To begin with, he rejects the idea that Hitler stood for extreme forms of nationalism and totalitarianism or that his antisemitism is merely a radical incarnation of atavistic hatred of the Jews. Instead, Snyder claims that a very relevant qualitative difference intervenes between Hitler’s antisemitism and other manifestations of contempt for the Jews.

From the *Führer’s* point of view, the sole truth about the world – its essence to be preserved and honored – is the struggle among races, which, in the case of human beings, is a struggle among species. According to this *Weltanschauung*, Jews are to be understood in a very peculiar and unusual way: they are not a race – not even an inferior race – but something like a counter-race. They participate in the struggle of races by destroying it: the Jewish will to power, for Hitler, consists of fabricating ideas, specially ideas of reciprocity, designed to transcend and deny racial connections. In Hitler’s mind, things so notably different from each other such as Capitalism (insofar it includes contracts and multilateral businesses), Communism (which asserts the sovereignty of the notion of class), and Christianism (with his appeal to universal love) are all Jewish creations.

Hitler’s crucial value is, therefore, race. The Nation and the State, as everything else, are mere transitory instruments to be strategically used by the Nazis. As Snyder states, Hitler is to be characterized not as totalitarian or a nationalist but as a zoological (or ecological) anarchist.

That said, the American historian considers a major mistake to take this ideology simply as a rhetorical game to enchant, seduce or distract the masses. His hypothesis is that Hitler’s
emphasis on race and his views on Jewishness as an ecological threat made room for practical action and effective policies. Although not directly or automatically, they counted as conditions for the Holocaust. The Führer’s zoological anarchism gradually made its way in material reality, nurtured and to some extent modified by a series of events that took place in the German political scene and, some years later, in the course of the war.

The most obvious material vector of Nazi ideology was the SS: ‘Take seriously its self-definition as race institution,’ Snyder warns. And he goes on: ‘Don’t look at the uniforms and think of the SS as paramilitary or para-state organization, it was not.’ Before Hitler took power, the SS (on a par with SA, which was purged and abolished in 1934) continuously undermined German political institutions: by challenging, through the exercise of brutality, the monopoly of violence, it attacked directly what Weber sees as the very essence of the State. In the period between Hitler’s seizure of power and the invasion of Poland, the SS infiltrated corporations such as the police, blurring the boundaries between state institutions and racial institutions. In addition, it was responsible for the administration of the first concentration camps in Germany, zones without law which, although restricted in number and apparently not so relevant, served as a model and an example of what would happen later on in the occupied territories of the East.

As the expansionist plans of the Reich evolved, the racial and anarchist element of Hitler's political project continued to unfold. A preliminary experience in this regard took place in Austria, during the so-called Anschluss, even before the invasion of Poland. From day to night, the Austrian State simply vanished. Along with the destruction of the institutions, the protection to Jewish people as citizens disappeared. A new order was being created, and local
people adhered to it by blaming the Jews for the old order. According to Snyder, this is very clear in the ‘scrubbing rituals’ undertook right after the Anschluss:

The “scrubbing parties” were also political. Jews were cleaning the streets at certain places, working with acid, brushes, and their bare hands to remove one sort of mark. They were erasing a word that had been painted on Vienna’s avenues only a few days before: “Austria.” That word had been the slogan of Schuschnigg [the Chancellor of Austria from 1934 to 1938]’s referendum propaganda, of which Jews could now be portrayed as the organizers.40

Ironically, Snyder points out, things just began to calm down when, after this semi-chaotic phase of transition, Austria was formally incorporated to Germany, and a minimum of institutional normality was re-established in the country.

In 1939, the invasion of Poland, in turn, triggered a much more lasting and consequential case of destruction of the State. Before the attack, Hitler made clear to his High Command that the war against Poland was not a conventional one: it was to be done against a State that not only did not existed at that very moment as it had never existed before. It was not simply the case of occupying a territory. The orders were clear enough: it was a matter of hunting, imprisoning in camps and often killing civilian leaders, military officers, and Catholic priests. The same rationality once applied to the imperialist colonial enterprise – to conquer a territory as if its population was not politically and socially organized or even existed – was implemented in Poland. Under such conditions, marked by the suspension of legal order, something like the ghettos – in essence, a violation of property rights and the very notion of habeas corpus –
became possible. Jews began to die of hunger and disease by thousands. A step towards the Final Solution was taken, but it had not yet been reached.

The turning point came two years later, in 1941, with Operation Barba Rossa, the attempt to seize the Soviet Union. Snyder draws attention to the fact that the first Soviet territories annexed by the Germans were precisely those which had been taken shortly before by the Bolsheviks in eastern Poland and along the Baltic. This dual occupation is a crucial fact:

In its newly acquired lands, the Soviet Union created material, psychological and political resources for Germans, openings for future Nazi power in eastern Europe that had not existed before 1939. Though Soviets did not intend to create these resources, their availability was decisive for the course of the events after the Germans invaded these lands. This was true in eastern Poland in 1939 and would be all the more true in the Baltic states after their occupation and annexation by the Soviet Union in the summer of 1940.41

One example (among many other) helps us to understand what he is trying to say:

In altering the character of politics, the Soviets created a psychological resource. Jews were given the appearance but not the reality of power ... The Soviets had no particular desire to promote Jews as such, although a few commanders and officials opined that Jews were more reliable than Poles. Still, Jews were among those who were available and exhibited the willingness and skills to take up new positions. Jews were never the majority of local collaborators with the Soviet regime; Belarusians and Ukrainians were
overall far more numerous. Local Jews never held real power, with the exception of a few weeks in autumn 1939, and that on a very local scale, and alongside other, non-Jewish, collaborators. Nevertheless, the change of regime made Jews collectively vulnerable. When the Germans invaded, the actual administrators of the new Soviet territory, the Soviet officials from the east, could marshal the resources they needed to flee. But the local Jews, those who had collaborated with the Soviets and those who had not, generally remained behind.42

On a par with heavy weapons and ammunition, the Germans introduced a slogan Hitler cultivated since Mein Kampf: the idea that Communism was Jewish, a result of an international conspiracy to rule the world. “The Jews are Communists, and the Communists are Jews,” the invaders repeated. In doing so, they expected that the local population undertook a number of pogroms. But under the conditions previously created by the Soviet occupation, what they saw — against their expectations, Snyder emphasizes — was a much more powerful sequence of events. Former Communists and people who in some way had collaborated with the Bolsheviks took Hitler’s slogan as a password to erase the commitments to the old order. They simply started to exterminate the Jews around them. Nazis were learning in practice under which conditions the desire to get rid of the Jews was feasible. Soon they also would learn that, in the chaos they engendered in the East, even their fellow citizens were capable of perpetrating previously unthinkable deeds. In relation to this, it suffices to say that German conventional policemen killed more Jews than the SS members in the East. They simply fired their victims in cold blood, at the edge of huge mass graves. After the assassinations, they went back home, ‘where they helped to control the traffic,’ Snyder observers sarcastically.43
That was how Holocaust was born: as an unexpected byproduct of the invasion of Soviet Union. Its hallmark was improvisation, and so will it be until the end of the war.\textsuperscript{44} Even Nazi’s death facilities emerged crucially in the heat of the moment, as momentary solutions to a practical question: the urge to separate the Germans from the criminal acts they were perpetrating. Unlike what is usually assumed, these death facilities definitely could not represent a technical or scientific escalation:

[As an alternative method to mass shootings] The Germans start gassing with vans in the East. They do it, so they don’t have to watch the children while they kill them. The technology involved is just shunting the exhausting pipe into the hold of the van... The next innovation – or technology, if you like – is you park the vans, take the wheels off and put them on blocks. That is Chelmno. The next innovation... is you take the internal combustion engine out of the vehicle and then you pipe the exhaust into a sealed chamber. That is Treblinka, Belzec e Sobibor. The next innovation after that is Auschwitz, where you, once you have realized you can use a sealed chamber, use hydrogen cyanide instead of exhaust. This is not high technology. This is improvisation basically based on what is at hand. The crucial thing, as I see it, is the learning that this can be done. The technique is not important.\textsuperscript{45}

How Snyder comes to this narrative? How his view on the Holocaust is elaborated? In the case of Hitler’s ideology, all he does is to carefully re-read canonical sources such as \textit{Mein Kampf}, the \textit{Zweites Buch}, and the \textit{Führer}’s discourses. In the case of the articulation of Nazi ideology to material reality, Snyder’s background is much more radical: as we shall see in the
following section, he embraces a global critique of current historiography on the Holocaust as well as some completely new methodological decisions.

**Snyder’s critique of the historiography on the Holocaust**

Westerns historians, Snyder recognizes, often propose quite sophisticated views on the Holocaust, and of course they all know well that the huge majority of the victims lived and died in the East. The problem is the way the East, with almost no exception, is grasped by the scholars. Snyder is convinced that his colleagues are still caught in the colonial epistemic, that is to say, they ‘look at the territories under colonial rules – in this case the German colonial rule – from the point of view of the colonizers (of course, being quite critical to the colonizers).’ Objectively, this means that, in referring to Eastern Europe, almost all the studies on the Holocaust ‘were written on the basis of German sources.’ Snyder calls the attention to the exceptionality of this kind of procedure in comparison to almost all other historiographies.

Imagine someone writing about occupied France, and then saying: “By the way, I don’t know French. Therefore, I didn’t use French sources”. I think that it will strike us as outlandish… Yet, routinely, indeed normatively, when we write about Eastern Europe … we write about it without using vernacular sources at all.46

It is not the case to say that the East European Jews are absent from the historiographical literature on the Holocaust. On the contrary, their fates are sensitively taken into account. Yet, as Snyder notes, the narratives are structured in a way that they ‘rise upon the horizon just in time
to be killed. They appear on the page they are going to be killed.’ As a result, Snyder continues, they are ‘denuded from a certain kind of reality that German institutions enjoy.’ Likewise, the places where they lived – strangely enough, the places where the Holocaust actually happened ‘remain unfamiliar.’

Having all this in mind, Snyder takes his most relevant and innovative methodological step: the consideration of the Eastern European sources. For him, this is a moral commitment, an effort to restore the concreteness and palpability the Eastern European territories and peoples deserve. But it is also an attempt to establish a radically new geography of the Holocaust. Its core is no longer German alone but the interactions between German and what he calls the bloodlands, a territory that ‘extends from central Poland to western Russia, through Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic States.’ In Snyder’s argument, as I tried to demonstrate in the previous section, the bloodlands – the places where Hitler’s destructive power met Stalin’s destructive power – hide the key to the understanding of the emergence of the mass killings, the opportunity to bridge the gap between what happened in German before the war and the Holocaust itself.

In the bloodlands, millions of civilians – most of them, Jews – were killed during the Nazi occupation. In these same territories, millions had already died under Stalinism. Snyder is amazed by the fact that, even so, the bloodlands were not perceived as such, their self-evidence was not properly noticed by Western historiography. Why? How can this telling omission be explained? Snyder invokes many causes for our blindness: a recalcitrant ethnocentrism, for instance. Or the difficulties inherent in the task of learning Eastern European languages. Or the fact that the archives remained closed during the Cold War. Yet, in view of our aims in this essay, one of the deeds analyzed by him deserves special attention: the role of the memory of the survivors in the constitution of our mental maps on the Holocaust. In approaching it, I will focus
on Snyder’s remarks on Auschwitz as a driving force in the constitution of these mental maps. Finally, by way of conclusion, I will also try to demonstrate that Snyder’s analysis reverberates some central aspects of Levi’s ontology of survival (as well as its consequences for the construction of the memory of the Holocaust).

**Auschwitz is grey**

In the postwar era, the denunciation and understanding of the Holocaust were not always on the agenda. Most historians believe that throughout the first fifteen years after the armistice the victims of the conflict were spoken of in general terms, without much attention to the specificity of the destiny reserved for the Jews. This trend, they continue, would have reversed in the early 1960s, with the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel. Gradually – in a process whose peak dates back to the end of the last century – the Holocaust would become a universal symbol of malevolence. And if indeed the Holocaust assumed such a prominence, Auschwitz is certainly the hard core of this symbology – the so-called apex of extreme evil perpetrated against the Jews.

For Timothy Snyder, this emphasis on Auschwitz is extremely misleading. Rather, Auschwitz, as it were, must be inscribed into the periphery of the system, and not into its core:

In the history of the Holocaust, Auschwitz was a place where the third technique of mass killing was developed, third in chronological order and also third in significance. The most important technique, because it came first, because it killed the most Jews, and because it demonstrated that a Final Solution by mass killing was possible, was shooting
over pits. The next most important, and the next to be developed, was asphyxiation by the exhaust fumes of internal combustion engines. ⁵⁰

Auschwitz was a late invention. It emerged when Eastern European Jews were already dead. It demarcates the moment when the war against the Soviets was lost, and Hitler was about to focus on an alternative aim: the extermination of the Jews who lived not under States that Nazism had destroyed, but of those considered by Germany to be sovereign. In those countries, Snyder adds, a very important condition for deportation was often lacking: the prior annulment of the citizenship of the Jews, their disengagement from the states to which they were attached. As a result,

In many places from which the Jews were to be sent to Auschwitz ... [they] survived. Millions of European Jews who were condemned to die at Auschwitz survived because they never boarded a train. Jews under German control who were to be sent to Auschwitz were more likely to survive than Jews under German control who are not supposed to be sent to Auschwitz. ⁵¹

Snyder calls this condition Auschwitz’s paradox:

That is the Auschwitz paradox, and it can only be resolved by considering how states were and were not destroyed [by the Nazis]. These are the political particularities that explain the different outcomes within the universal design. Auschwitz demonstrates the
universal design to kill Jews. It also demonstrates the general significance of statehood in protecting them.52

Crucial to my purposes in this essay is another remark by Snyder regarding the relationship between Auschwitz and survival: even among the deportees, he indicates, the number of survivors was exceptionally high, at least in comparison to the pattern established by the Nazis in the East. The reason for that, he argues, was its mixed, ambiguous, configuration. As Snyder notes in a long and key passage,

The distinction between concentration camps and killing sites cannot be made perfectly: people were executed and people were starved in camps. Yet there is a difference between a camp sentence and a death sentence, between labor and gas, between slavery and bullets. The tremendous majority of the mortal victims of both German and Soviet regimes never saw a camp. Auschwitz was two things at once: a labor camp and a death facility. Auschwitz thus belongs to two histories, related but distinct. Auschwitz-as-labor-camp is more representative of the experience of the large number of people who endured German (or Soviet) policies of concentration, whereas Auschwitz-as-death-facility is more typical of the fates of those who were deliberately killed. Most of the Jews who arrived at Auschwitz were simply gassed; they, like almost all of the fourteen million killed in the bloodlands, never spent time in a concentration camp.

The German and Soviet concentration camps surround the bloodlands, from both east and west, blurring the black with their shades of grey.53
‘Shades of grey,’ Snyder writes, and this reference to greyness immediately lead us back to Primo Levi. For Snyder, as for Levi, greyness is a metaphor for ambiguity. For Snyder, as for Levi, this metaphor is strictly related to the possibility of survival. For Snyder, as for Levi, surviving is an exceptional condition, dislocated from the core of the Holocaust, with consequences to the construction of memory. Of course, at the same time, there are some differences between Snyder’s metaphor and Levi’s metaphor: for Snyder, it takes part in a geography (therefore, when he thinks about the survivor’s dislocated existence, he thinks about a geographically dislocated existence); for Levi, it (at least initially) takes part in a sociology (therefore, when he thinks about the survivor’s dislocated existence, he thinks about a sociologically dislocated existence). Anyway, Levi’s sociology is conceived in topological terms – after all, he speaks of a grey zone –, and this very fact allows us to establish some new, unsuspected analogies between his work and Snyder’s historiography. Let me try to be clear about it.

In an emblematic scene of The Truce, Levi depicts the moment when, right after the liberation, he realizes how large was Auschwitz complex, of which he had known only a small part:

At Buna [one of the thirty-nine camps of Auschwitz, were Primo Levi was imprisoned], we do not know much of the ‘main camp’, of Auschwitz properly: the Häflinge [the German word for ‘prisoners’] transferred to one capto another were few de um camp, hardly talkative (no Häflting [prisoner, in the singular] was), and not easily believed.
When Yankel’s cart crossed the famous threshold, we were amazed. Buna-Monowitz, with its twelve thousand inhabitants, was a village in comparison.\textsuperscript{54}

From that point on, the Holocaust, for him, was no longer Buna-Monowitz but a much more inclusive subject. A subject that, as the passage reveals, exists in the space, as a geography (and, of course, in time, as history). Primo Levi was not a professional geographer. Even so, in \textit{The Drowned and the Saved} (and other pieces of his late work), he took the risk of providing a broader view of the Holocaust. At end of the day, as I argued, he turned the anthropology and the sociology of Buna-Monowitz he developed since \textit{If This is a Man} into an ontology of survival. And as I also tried to demonstrate, the ontology of survival must be taken as a critique of memory, in the sense that it recognizes the structural lacuna that inhabits the survivor’s very existence. Yet, it is time to propose a more ambitious hypothesis: maybe what Primo Levi provides is also a model for understanding the geography of the Holocaust. A geography that conceives Holocaust space as an articulation of darker zones and brighter ones.

We are, I suppose, at the crossroads where Primo Levi’s work meets Timothy Snyder’s own critique of memory and own geography of the Holocaust, a dive into the darker areas of the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{55} It is also here that Primo Levi’s work intersects with Timothy Snyder’s assumption that Auschwitz, amazingly, may well be the name of a somewhat comfortable symbol. For Germans, Snyder writes, it enables the concealment of the fact that, before the Lager was put in use, thousands of their compatriots were personally involved in the systematic and continued shooting of Jews. The claim that most Germans were unaware of the extermination of Jews while they were occurring remains plausible to the grotesque: ‘It is possible,’ Snyder wrote, ‘that some
Germans did not know exactly what happened at Auschwitz. It is not possible that many Germans did not know about the mass murder of Jews.  

Auschwitz as metonymy of the Holocaust was also a convenient symbol for post-war Soviet Union and post-communist Russia. It obliterates the fact that the mass murders were launched in places the Bolsheviks had just conquered and was perpetrated with the help of people who were communists until the day before was communist. Auschwitz, in fact, ‘was one of the few parts of the Holocaust to which Soviet citizens did not contribute.’

Insisting on the idea of the Auschwitz as a synonym of the Holocaust actually reassures all of us:

Insofar as the Holocaust is limited to Auschwitz, it can be isolated from most of the nations it touched as well as from the landscapes it altered. The gates and walls of Auschwitz can seem to contain an evil that, in fact, extended from Paris to Smolensk. Auschwitz, a German word defining a bit of territory that before and after the war was in Poland, does not seem like an actual place. It is surrounded by mental as well as physical barbed wire. Auschwitz calls to mind mechanized killing, or ruthless bureaucracy, or the march of modernity, or even the endpoint of enlightenment. This makes the murder of children, women, and men seem like an inhuman process in which forces larger than the human were entirely responsible. When the mass murder of Jews is limited to an exceptional place and treated as the result of impersonal procedures, then we need not confront the fact that people not very different from us murdered other people not very different from us at close quarters.
For sure, it is true that Primo Levi supported until his death the idea that Auschwitz was a – or even the – limit-case of suffering and degradation (in one of his last essays he called it a ‘black hole’). But at the same time he recognized the cognitive and ontological restraints of memory.\textsuperscript{59} And, above all, mainly by means of the notion of the grey zone, he also sketched a map to transcend it.

\textsuperscript{1} For sure, Snyder’s claim is extremely controversial and contemptuous. It faces a large number of objections and divergent perspectives on the relationship between history and memory. He is well aware of how challenging the argument is both in historiographical and moral terms. In his own words, “it is sad to say so, and it is hard to find the right words.” (Quoted from ‘Timothy Snyder on the Disjuncture Between History and Memory’. Available in https://vimeo.com/24419312). Moreover, it is important to emphasize that, in assuming the disjuncture between history and memory, he is not denying the relevance of memory, without which Holocaust Studies might not have even been once established.


\textsuperscript{4} According to Dylan Evans, in \textit{An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis} (New York and London: Routledge, p. 209), the German word \textit{Nachträglichkeit}, often translated as ‘afterwardness’ or ‘retroaction’, refers “to the way that, in the psyche, present events affect past events \textit{a posteriori}, since the past exists in the psyche only as a set of memories which are constantly being reworked and reinterpreted in the light of present experience. What concerns psychoanalysis is not the real past sequence of events in themselves, but the way that these events exist now in memory and the way that the patient reports them.”

\textsuperscript{5} Levi, Primo. \textit{If this is a man}, p. 86.

Levi, Primo, *If this is a man*, p. 21

Ibid, p. 11

Ibid, p. 42

Ibid, p. 103.

Ibid, p. 44.


Ibid., p. 26

Ibid, p.26

Ibid, p. 29

Ibid, p. 33.


Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 29. Moreover, additional tensions were deliberately introduced into the system by the perpetrators. The commander of the death camp and SS guards – “who were often good psychologists” (p. 36) – recruited the Kapos among “common criminals, taken from prisons, to whom a career as a torturer offered an excellent alternative to detention”. (p. 40)


Ibid., p.10.


Ibid, p. 32


Judith Kelly, in *Primo Levi: Recording and reconstruction in testimonial literature* (London: Troubador, 2000), calls this condition “the meaningless prestige of the survivor”.


29 Primo Levi. *If this is a man*, pp. 12-13.

30 “The mirror stage describes the formation of the ego via the process of identification; the ego is the result of identifying with one’s own specular image. The key to this phenomenon lies in the prematurity of the human baby: at six months, the baby still lacks coordination. However, its visual system is relatively advanced, which means that it can recognize itself in the mirror before attaining control over its bodily movements. The baby sees its own image as whole … and the synthesis of this image produces a sense of contrast with the uncoordination of the body, which is experienced as a fragmented body; this contrast is first felt by the infant as a rivalry with its own image, because the wholeness of the image threatens the subject with fragmentation, and the mirror stage thereby gives rise to an aggressive tension between the subject and the image.” (Dylan Evans. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. New York and London? Routledge, 1996, p. 118)


34 Primo Levi. *If this is a man*, pp. 20-21.


37 Primo Levi. *If this is a man*, pp. 15-16.

38 See ‘Timothy Snyder on the Disjuncture Between History and Memory’. Available in https://vimeo.com/24419312


40 Timothy Snyder. *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*. New York: Tim Duggan Books 2015, p 104. The referendum was designed to decide if Austria should be annexed or remain independent. It never happened.

42 Ibid, p. 129

43 Timothy Snyder. ‘International History Workshop. Black Earth: The Holocaust as history and warning’.

44 For Snyder, “Hitler always wanted the Jews to be removed from the planet. Whether they were deported or whether they were murdered was a matter of perfect indifference to him. For me, that is morally worst than some kind of plan from the beginning to murder everyone.”

45 Timothy Snyder. ‘International History Workshop. Black Earth: The Holocaust as history and warning’. Available in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWyV5b8J8z8&t=2915s.. At this point it is important to emphasize another aspect of the ideological package presented by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. His distrust in science as a means of salvation for humanity or even the Germans: “Hitler explicitly says that science can save us from resource war is a Jewish swindle, a Jewish lie. He is very explicit that any hope that one has for science to save us from fundamental competition for land and food, which is our fate, that that idea is Jewish too.” It is, by the way, this disbelief in Science and technology one of the major reasons why Hitler decided to conquer Eastern Europe. To a large extent, he invaded the Soviet Union in order to take over Ukraine’s fertile lands. Ukraine was what he named *Lebensraum*, the vital space to which the *Führer* repeatedly referred, where he hoped to seat thousands of German farmers. *Lebensraum*, as Snyder says, is “a substitute for Science”, an alternative to the fact that Hitler disdained the possibility that agricultural defenses, irrigation, and other scientifically-developed procedures could guarantee German food security.

46 Timothy Snyder ‘Timothy Snyder on the Disjuncture Between History and Memory’

47 Ibid.

48 This view is challenged by D. Cesarini; E. Sundquist, (eds.) *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence*. (Londres: Routledge, 2015). They claim that, far from lapsing into silence, individual survivors, survivor-scholars, researchers, historical commissions, theatre directors and film makers did respond to the destruction of the European Jews.

49 In our days, Giorgio Agamben is probably the most famous intellectual committed to this position. For him, as William McClellan writes, Auschwitz “stands as a metonymy for the singular historical event variously named the Holocaust, Shoah, or the Extermination of the Jews.” (‘Primo Levi, Giorgio Agamben, and the new ethics of reading’. In: Sergio Pugliese (ed.) The Legacy of Primo Levi. Nova York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, p. 147)
Combining references such as Foucault, Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Carl Schmitt, and ancient Latin texts, Agamben concludes that “[t]he Jew living under Nazism is the privileged negative referent of the new biopolitical sovereignty and is, as such, a flagrant case of a homo sacer in the sense of a life that may be killed but not sacrificed. [...] the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler had announced, “as lice,” which is to say, as bare life. The dimension in which the extermination took place is neither religion nor law, but biopolitics. (Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer*: Sovereign Power and Bare Life. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 121)

50 Timothy Snyder. *Black Earth*, p. 209

51 Ibid, p. 211

52 Ibid, p. 211-2


54 Primo Levi. *The Drowned and The Saved*, p. 22

55 For Snyder, the critique of memory – the assumption of a disjuncture between history and memory – is primarily topological, geographical, topological “places where the Holocaust actually happened… are unfamiliar. The whole terrain, the whole landscape and people who live there are basically unfamiliar.

56 Timothy Snyder. *Black Earth*, p. 207

57 Ibid., p. 208

58 Ibid., p. 209

59 Quoting Primo Levi’s *The Reawakening*, Lucie Benchouha, in *Primo Levi: Rewriting the Holocaust* (London: Troubador, 2006, p. 26) mentions “la cesura de Auschwitz”, which separates the past from the present. But in fact, as we argue, this gap separates Auschwitz from itself, in the sense that the survivors’ existence is ontologically separated from the experiences of those who died.