

INTRODUCTION

A Reversal in Perspective

A strange debate has been raging in Western democracies in recent years, one that raises a number of interrelated questions. Is the Shoah a unique event in the history of humanity, or is it just one out of the many genocides marking the bloody history of the twentieth century? Is this catastrophe to be understood in the sole light of the singular experience of the Jewish condition or in that of the universal experience of contemporary politics? What about the Armenians, the Gypsies, the Cambodians, and the Rwandans? Were they not struck by the same tragedy as the Jews? How much importance is to be given to the Jewish dimension of the genocide and how much to its universal thrust?

In this debate, at first sight academic, it is the assumption of the “singularity of the Shoah” that is on the hot seat. There are those who see the Shoah as an utterly unique event with the Jews at its center and consider comparisons to any other event a sacrilege. This thesis has been stated over and over again in the English-speaking world.¹ Among its advocates are Elie Wiesel, who regards the Holocaust as “the ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted”;² Georges Steiner, who locates the “qualitative differences between the Shoah and innumerable other examples of mass murder” in the “symbolic and metaphysical-theological realm”;³ Claude Lanzmann, who refers to the “obscene effrontery” of those who “deny the specificity of the Holocaust and its impious character by diluting or burying an exorbitant crime, of another nature altogether, in a question of universal evil”;⁴ and Paul Ricœur, for whom the Shoah is a “uniquely unique event” and its victims “delegates to our memory of all the victims of history.”⁵ All of the theologies of the Shoah that see a divine mystery in it subscribe to this viewpoint. The others, their staunch opponents, hold this interpretation to be a self-serving ideological manipulation aimed at promoting the power, prestige, and identity of the Jews in particular and Western discourse in general. Western democracies, they claim, identify with Jewish martyrology in an attempt to wash away their own genocidal colonial sins. The extermination of the Jews would

thus “mask” other genocides in the past and, worse still, in the present. Notwithstanding the revisionist tone of this argument, it is defended not so much by revisionists as by thinkers belonging to what used to be qualified as leftist circles, who criticize the “conservative liberal ideology”⁶ in particular, and liberal democracy in general.

What they are denouncing in the invocation of the Shoah’s uniqueness is the claim by a particular group to what Tzvetan Todorov calls “a permanent privilege.” “Such-and-such a group has been a victim of injustice in the past,” he explains. “This opens to it in the present an inexhaustible line of credit. Since society recognizes that groups, and not individuals, have rights, you might as well profit from it; and, the greater the offense in the past, the greater the rights in the present. Instead of struggling to obtain a privilege, you receive it automatically by belonging to a once-disfavored group.”⁷ Todorov also states that “[T]he group that does not manage to detach itself from persistent commemoration of the past [. . .], or rather those who at the center of that group incite others to live thus, are less deserving of sympathy: in this case, the past serves to repress the present.”⁸ We can clearly see that the collective status of the Jews is very much at issue in this debate. According to Alain Brossat, the discourse on the singularity of the Shoah has ceased to focus on the singular monstrous nature of the crime “to harden into a narrowly sectarian-stance: the Shoah is us, its uniqueness is ours, it is our affair. It is not a surprise that the (historical) discourse of singularity easily joins up with the religious discourse of chosenness. Auschwitz becomes paradoxically intelligible as the sign or mark of the elective particularity of Jewish destiny.” Brossat concludes that “Israel, defined as a payment for Auschwitz, becomes inseparable from the Shoah [. . . and] as insane and unimaginable as it might seem, the Shoah enters the sphere of calculations and interests” of “Jewish community leaders in the Diaspora” and “strategists in the State of Israel.”⁹

Such an ideological outlook extends beyond the confines of the newly emerging Left to encompass coalitions more to the center Right of the political spectrum (Gaullist or “national republican”) that readily join in the chorus. It is commonplace in these circles to hear criticism of Jewish “*communautarisme*.”¹⁰ And it is sometimes voiced with regard to the Shoah. Jean Mattéoli, chairman of the Study Mission on the Spoliation of Jews in France¹¹ and formerly a French resistance fighter, expressed his “hope that the Jews do not make this mistake. French Jews are Jews but they are French. To make a distinction between Jewish Frenchmen and Catholic Frenchmen, or what have you, for strictly comparable damages would create a truly disturbing precedent, to which the Jews themselves could ultimately fall victim. In France there is no difference at all between a Jew and a non-Jew [. . .]. The Germans were the ones who made this distinction [. . .]. It is sad to see the Jewish community declaring that it is satisfied with a sum

of money from German firms. There is no cause and effect relationship between the damage and the compensation.”¹² In short, French Jews were killed by the Germans because they were Jewish, but it was the Frenchmen in them who died. That such an ideological arc stretches from the Left to the Right underscores the structural rather than the conjunctural underpinnings of the debate on the uniqueness of the Shoah.

And what a strange debate it is! The “unique” character of an event (which is always singular, by definition) is seldom the subject of so much discussion. Who argues over the unique character of the French Revolution in 1789, an event peculiar to France yet of universal significance? What is being called into question in the current debate is the very substance of the event (be it absolutized or negated)—namely, the *Jewish* victims. As we will see, the question of singularity and universality is not just hollow verbosity; a good number of other issues are surfacing in this debate. We have reached a critical juncture: those who lived through the Shoah directly and their contemporaries are passing away, and the memory of the Shoah is about to be instituted for generations to come.

What, then, is the deep-seated, hidden meaning of this controversy? On the one hand, the thesis of absolute singularity safeguards the central phenomenon of the Shoah, namely, the identity of the victims, but at the same time it inevitably converts the Shoah into an absolute that compels silence and opens onto an aura of mystery whose sacredness is highly problematical. On the other hand, the thesis of absolute universality disregards the concrete reality of the extermination of the Jews and tends in the direction of the most simplistically disturbing interpretation possible, that of a “plot” on the part of Jews who are accused of symbolically manipulating the Shoah to serve their own interests.

I will start my analysis with the following hypothesis: If the Shoah indeed concerns everyone insofar as it addresses the question of the meaning and value of modernity, then it is solely because the singular experience of the Jews is at its center. The Shoah thus can be understood from the perspective of the many hecatombs that marked the twentieth century without its uniqueness being negated. If the Shoah is to serve as a “lesson” to us, then it is precisely this problematical superposition of the singular and the universal that must be understood. And by lesson I certainly do not mean the discovery of an intrinsic “meaning” to the Shoah or a utilitarian interpretation that turns it into an *exemplum*, a model for understanding a whole series of events, as Tzvetan Todorov would have it. The Shoah marks a major break in modernity, and it is a matter of comprehending its effects on those of us who live “after.”

It is a break that lacerates us in all spheres of life and tears through the spaces of democratic politics. I will try to delineate its contours progressively,

starting from the current controversy and delving deep down into its buried fundamentals, to the “primal scene” of modern politics. What does it reveal to us about the modern world against the backdrop of the promises harbored by modernity and the expectations that it had awakened? My purpose in raising this question is neither moral nor psychological—terms in which it has been framed repeatedly before. Rather, it is ethical, for ethics concerns acts. And what better, more dignified, and vivifying way is there of memorializing the victims of the genocide than drawing a lesson from the Shoah insofar as our acts are concerned, which means comprehending the vices of modern politics to prevent such catastrophes from happening again.

Such an endeavor is premised upon a “comprehensive” approach embracing the singular and the universal, Jews and modern people, the unique Shoah, and the whole political modernity of the democratic nation-state. The point is not to judge on the basis of moral principles, as has been done so many times before, but to understand what happened in the past and what is happening today. There are those who try to delegitimize attempts to “think Auschwitz”¹³ by asserting that all such efforts are sacrilegious. This is a purely rhetorical, self-contradictory stance, since the assertion is itself a product of thought. Filmmakers, writers, philosophers, or theologians who take up the Shoah obviously structure their ideas, arrange their effects, and select the elements that will be integrated into their works. Only through thought, and not mystery, can we prevent banalization and indifference. Only by questioning reality can we escape the grips of fate. Auschwitz did not take place at some indefinite time in some abstract realm of principles. It happened in the very heart of modern, democratic Europe. Masking this reality, prohibiting its intellectual grasp, amounts to condemning the “survivors’ (and most particularly the Jews) to the eternal status of victims, bound forever to Nazism; it means letting an unresolved “mystery” sap democracy until it undermines or corrupts it totally. Moreover, such a taboo on an event can only lead to its eclipse in the long run. It becomes too heavy and too remote a burden for individual consciousness to bear.

These questions do not concern the number of angels on the head of a pin. They are not merely a matter of memory, nor do they concern the past only. They have acute, even dire, present-day relevance, and they prefigure the politics of tomorrow. The debate on the Shoah engages a subterranean and subjacent debate on the future of modern politics. The Second World War marked a break in the history of the modern world, and democracy has not been the same since. Its normative transcendence has been eroded, its abstract universality tempered. The rights of man have opened the doors to women, blacks, and cultural and sexual minorities. While multiculturalism was becoming a buzzword in Europe, President Clinton expressed his hope that the United States would be the world’s first truly

“multiracial democracy”; in the same country, “communitarianism” is being increasingly advocated in an attempt to bring individuals and social groups closer to politics. The collapse of communism announced even more drastic changes, including the inevitable decline of the parliamentary system of political representation based on a bipolar cleavage between the Left and the Right. In what way can the Shoah, as the culmination of a long process set in motion at the start of the modern era, elucidate current developments in democratic citizenship? In what way can the singular experience that the Jews had of democratic citizenship shed light on recent realities? The Jewish experience of absolute singularization within citizenship could serve as a litmus test for democracy in general. We need not delve very far into the experience that the Jews had of a radical loss of citizenship to see that the life they were forced to endure, outside the civilized democratic framework, as if in a state of civic weightlessness, casts by default a harsh light on political modernity, and the precious lesson to be learned from this concerns everybody. Both critics and advocates of the Shoah’s singularity are implicitly referring to an order of things that is beyond them. Far from being a manipulation by Jews, as revisionists and neoleftists contend, the (often excessive) centrality of the Shoah in public debate may well express something of the fundamental democratic aspiration and deeply ingrained life instinct that has survived totalitarianism and the hecatombs of the twentieth century. Examining these perspectives, hidden behind all the rhetorical noise, is at the heart of my investigation.

To carry through such a task involves comprehending this “singularity” not as an exception to modernity but as a phenomenon inherent to it, and this requires a qualitative leap. Instead of raising the question of the singularity *of* the Shoah, it is the singularity *in* the Shoah that is at issue. It is the *singularization* of the Jews in the Shoah that needs to be analyzed. If the Shoah is to be understood as an intrinsic part of modernity of universal import, then the singularity lodged at its center assumes a different dimension. The focus is not so much on the event’s unique, exceptional character as on the radical, absolute singularization to which the Jews were subjected in Europe and which culminated in their extermination. How did it come to pass that the Jews of Europe, individual citizens and nationals of their respective countries, were singled out from their fellow countrymen to be concentrated and destroyed en masse with no regard to nationality, to be demoted from a legal and political status to a racial and biological state? What makes for the unique, incomparable character of the Shoah is this experience of singularization of the Jews in the realm of democratic citizenship in particular and of political modernity in general, the experience of being excised from contemporary humanity. We must start from reality, that is, from the civic status of Jews and not from some mythical

notion of an “eternal” Jew, dissociated and dissociable from his citizenship. We must start from modernity to understand totalitarianism rather than thinking of the latter as an exception in an attempt to preserve the moral and ideological integrity of the former. What were the foundations upon which Nazism leaned to isolate the Jew in the citizen?

This shift in focus from the Jew to the citizen is a complete reversal in the usual perspective. It runs counter to the contention made by advocates of the singularity *of* the Shoah that it is the Jew in the citizen who is to be considered firstly, and even exclusively, as if one could separate the singularity of the Jew from the rational, democratic universalism of the citizen, which would remain intact. In point of fact, the question concerns democracy first and foremost. How did it come to pass that the Jew subsisted in the citizen without being protected, to the point of overriding the citizen in him or her?

Rethinking the Shoah in conjunction with modernity raises, however, a number of moral and epistemological questions that must be addressed. Apprehending modernity as an integral whole, embracing the Enlightenment and the Shoah, human rights and anti-Semitism or racism, democracy and totalitarianism as all part of the same picture is tricky, perhaps even dangerous, business because of the confused thinking to which it may lead. It means using an approach that is basically sociological (whose foremost concern, therefore, is not morality, which does not mean that it is immoral). This approach aims at acquiring a *morphological* view of reality, from a position outside the subject of contemplation, in an attempt to grasp it in its formal objectivity without taking its “spirit” into consideration. If we were to frame the issue in the terms that oppose intentionalist and functionalist historians of the Shoah, then this approach would fall into the functionalist category, since it endeavors to understand what it was in the making of modernity that could produce firstly anti-Semitism and then a catastrophe such as the Shoah. The “intentionalist” school would be the one that asserts the integrity of modernity, understood as a value and an ultimate ideal, that the happenstance of Nazism or the specific project of Hitler as an individual man threatened in an extemporaneous, erratic manner. To this school, the Nazi phenomenon was a departure from the rationality of modernity, which, as a structure, an edifice, and a value, has survived intact.

The morphological view does not necessarily apprehend the whole truth of a phenomenon, but it does grasp its force of inertia. For this reason, the approach must be accompanied by a protocol specifying the limits and defining the aims. Democracy is not totalitarian; the Rights of Man run contrary to racism; the emancipation of the Jews was defeated by the Shoah. But they all belonged to the same period of time (modernity), to the same place (Europe), and to the same society (the democratic nation-state). And

there is a pressing need to understand why this was so, particularly today in an era that abounds in genocides and human catastrophes. I am drawing therefore a very emphatic boundary between democracy and totalitarianism, knowing nonetheless that the line that divides brings together what it separates by setting them side by side.

It is this boundary that the revisionists cross when they see in democracy the mark of capitalism, Nazism, and colonialism. This is the case for Paul Rassinier, one of the foremost revisionists, for whom Nazi Germany, the capitalist bourgeois West, and the USSR are regimes of the same type, equally guilty of atrocities (the Gestapo, colonial wars, the Gulag and the KGB, etc.). It is also the case in neoleftist circles. Brossat sees a connection between recent crimes (“the Rwandan genocide, the ethnic purification by the Serbs and the uricide practices in Grozny and Sarajevo”) and “the distinctive dominant trait of our present-day history, namely the globalization of the democratic paradigm,” and he wonders about the “link between the now-total domination of a single politico-cultural model—capitalist democracy—and the outpouring of extreme violence.”¹⁴ Louis Janover, an analyst of the intelligentsia, quotes leftists denouncing “the so-called revisionist historians, nostalgic for National Socialism, who [...] transform a partial *truth*¹⁵—the democratic, Zionist and Stalinist manipulation of the Nazis’ genocidal enterprise—into a total lie,”¹⁶ while he himself asserts that what are called “the mistakes and blunders of ‘democracy’ are usually massacres.”¹⁷ All these views bear the stamp of Marxism and its critique of “bourgeois democracy.” In fact, this line of reasoning seems irresistibly drawn to the Marxist temptation to interpret the hiatus inherent in everyday life (the fact that an individual’s experience seldom lives up to his or her hopes and expectations) in ideological terms, as a mystification.

This will not be my case. I will distinguish between democracy as a value and a yet-to-be attained ideal, and democracy as an accomplished reality, a reality that has been implemented for the past two centuries and that has demonstrated all its potentials, the best and the worst. Knowing the ambivalence of modern reality, I will not use the failings of democracies as a pretext to call into question the democratic ideal. All the same, one cannot fail to note that democracy gave rise to the rule of law, but also to what Jacob Talmon called “totalitarian democracies.”¹⁸ In his classic study, the Israeli historian observes that totalitarianism was grounded in the democratic ideal and notably in the fervor that characterized the French Revolution. The two viewpoints are not necessarily contradictory. Democracy, liberty, and modernity are vague concepts that can be invested with different meanings (Communist-period use of the expression “socialist democracies” is a notable case in point). We can therefore criticize the perversion of democracy by “totalitarian democracies” in the name of the

democratic ideal while staying within the bounds of modern reason. It would be counterproductive to let ourselves be trapped by an ideological appropriation of words. On the ethical plane, my analysis will be guided by the spirit and promise of the democratic ideal, aptly summed up by the Republican motto “liberty, equality, fraternity.” But one must understand how this passion for liberty, equality, and human community (which is the true sense of the term *fraternity*) could lead to such grave miscarriages and failures, due no doubt to human beings but perhaps also to defects intrinsic to the ideas themselves and their underlying framework. This is why, to understand the Shoah and other political catastrophes of the twentieth century, we must take the democratic citizen as the starting point, not the “eternal” Jew in his singularity. Concentrating primarily on the Jew without examining the history of political modernity, whose figurehead is democracy, safeguards its ideal integrity but condemns us to understanding nothing about its erratic history. This perspective tends to view the Jew as an archetype outside history, and it promotes more literature and theology on the Shoah than political philosophy. I do not mean to say that theology has nothing to say about the Shoah, but neither can it say all there is to be said on the subject. The genocide brings humans into question well before God.

There are vast areas of darkness in modernity that the dazzle of the Enlightenment should not lead us to ignore, especially after such a long series of recurrent human and political catastrophes. One of its greatest “mysteries” is without a doubt the anti-Semitic phenomenon (before the racist phenomenon), which has remained unexplained despite the wealth of publications on the subject. We still have not understood what could give rise to it in a culture that had broken with Christianity, and its historical animosity toward Judaism, and emancipated the Jews (who played along) by assimilating them (to all other human beings). We still have not understood how the racist mania of classification and, more generally, the socioeconomic hierarchization of people (the classes) were possible in an era that gave primacy to equality. And what about the invention of universal man just when colonialism was conquering the planet and destroying entire civilizations? Why did the distinctive identity of the nation come to disrupt the principle of universality that governed human rights? Why can only nationals be citizens? The least that can be said is that there is a gap between the promises of modernity and reality, a structural ambivalence of sorts. And there have been times when darkness prevailed over light. Thus the transition to Nazism and Vichy took place in compliance with the formal rules of parliamentary democracy. In the Weimar Republic in 1932, a majority of the electorate (51 percent) did not hesitate to vote into parliament two parties—the Nazis and the Communists—that militated in favor of dissolving the Republic, and the advantage given to the Nazi Party

in these elections (37 percent in July and 33 percent in November) made it impossible to form a government without them. Setting aside the parliamentary intrigues of the Nazis and von Papen's conservative party, which can be put down to manipulation, the Nazi rise to power firstly expressed a deep-seated desire among the citizens of the Weimer Republic. In France, it was the National Assembly on July 10, 1940, that voted to confer absolute powers upon Marshal Pétain, who was thereby legally established as chief of state before he did away with the Republic.

To explore this equivocal area between democracy and totalitarianism, Tzvetan Todorov employs the concept of the "extreme." This topological metaphor fits the subject of analysis into a picture structured on the relationship between center and periphery, with the periphery characterized by its remoteness (at the extremity) from the source of all values (that is, from the center, which he maintains is "extreme" as well but by its intensity). The concentration camps are "the extreme manifestation of totalitarian regimes which are the extreme form of modern political life." As such, they serve as "an instrument, a magnifying glass" to get a better look at the ordinary morality and everyday reality of our world.¹⁹ Todorov's system of measurement thus uses excess rather than normality as a yardstick. The idea that excess can provide insight into the norm implicitly signifies that the norm harbors the potential of excess, or, to put it otherwise, that Nazism is a potential development of democracy. I will not have recourse to such a metaphor in my analysis, all the more so in that it serves Todorov to subsume the singularity of the destruction of the Jews into a more general category that fails, in my opinion, to apprehend what needs to be understood—namely, the singularization of the Jews in the Shoah.

To consider political modernity as a whole, and hence to put it to the test of totalitarianism and of the Shoah as typically "modern" phenomena, I propose to adopt Freud's model of the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. Just as there is a part of the mind that defies the individual's control, so democracy has an unconscious dimension. Irrationality, or rather prerationality, is lodged at the very heart of democratic rationality. It is a constituent part of its makeup. Repressed by the conscious mind (the emerged part of the iceberg), unconscious thoughts continue beneath the surface to exert an influence on the mind, to the point of submerging it in certain circumstances. The unconscious cannot be dissociated from the conscious. We can see in the latter democracy as a value and a potential prospect, and in the former, democracy as an accomplished history and an achieved reality. According to this model, everything that the self cannot accept in the real world is pushed into the unconscious, in particular, traumatic experiences, repressed to protect the development of the self. The conscious mind is like a frail craft floating on the sea of the unconscious, born from the sea

and fighting to withstand its turmoil. When Freud set out to explain the conscious in light of the unconscious, which the psychoanalyst tries to bring to the surface, he by no means pretended that the conscious was an illusory simulacrum, as Marx said of ideology. Quite the opposite—it was to clarify and solidify the conscious mind that he took to exploring the subterranean waters of the unconscious. Freud saw the conscious mind as the seat of the ego, the most resistant part of the individual despite its frailty, the locus of compromise between interiority and exteriority whose purpose is to safeguard the individual. Whereas the ego strives to be moral, the unconscious is amoral and therefore potentially immoral. To fight against the impulses welling up from the unconscious, it creates a hyper-moral superego whose energy is derived from the unconscious (the process of “sublimation”). Freud thought that the greatest saints, those who embodied the highest moral standards, had had to struggle to overcome stronger immoral impulses than individuals with ordinary passions. To Freud, then, morality was commensurate with the propensity for sin. But it remained a principle of regulation of life and the conscious self and not a mystification, as Marx would have said. In a similar way, in setting out to examine the unconscious dimension of democracy, my purpose is not to turn it against the conscious dimension in an attempt to undermine the foundations and value of the democratic ideal but, on the contrary, to strengthen democratic reason and sharpen its defenses against the realm of darkness lurking inside. Just as the extremely moral superego is closely related to the submoral unconscious, so there is a relationship or a contiguity between democracy and its flip side within a single system—the human psyche for Freud and modernity, notably in its political dimension, for our purposes. There would be, then, a structural flaw in modernity, which has given rise over the past two centuries to the demons that have ravaged democracy—the frail tip of the modern iceberg.

I am proposing here a tentative explanatory model that offers the advantage of being framed in the psychoanalytical terms that have become common everyday parlance. It is not meant to be the “last word” on the subject, but it may be useful insofar as it combines the qualities of a psychoanalytical approach with those of a more sociological methodology, providing a descriptive account of social reality. This model clearly demonstrates the “clinical” thrust of my undertaking, the aim of which is to probe the ins and outs of a strange phenomenon, prior to and as a foundation for the exercise of judgment. The sense of moral outrage that the Shoah elicits does not suffice; the haste with which moral judgment is passed all too often hides a refusal to undertake a considered examination of reality. This is a serious mistake when it comes to the analysis of totalitarianism, which is first and foremost a historical and political phenomenon. We can hardly hope to get rid of fascism simply by condemning it and holding it up to

public ridicule. To look at the question from an analytical perspective, we have to understand the good along with the evil, the moral along with its opposite. I am aware that this approach may shock common opinion with its inclination to immediacy and pathos. I also am aware that it runs counter to the current, all-embracing ethical outlook that runs the risk of becoming a new form of metaphysics if it refuses to recognize and examine the historical nature of the human condition.

The problematic that will be discussed here unfolds on two stages: Jewish singularity and democratic universalism. It is this antinomy that I will set out to understand. Part 1 concentrates on the contemporary manifestations of this singularity; part 2 delves into its universal substratum, that is, into the fundamentals of political modernity and its inhospitality to all forms of singularity, and understanding what constitutes this singularity will be the subject of part 3. In this method of exposition, the theory put forward cannot be fully stated at the outset, thus certain notions may assume a different meaning in the course of the analysis.