
Understanding Perpetrators?

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This chapter presents a teaching module that, through an engagement with a number of key texts, traces a history of scholarly and philosophical encounters with perpetrators of genocide and collective violence. Starting with canonical texts such as Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1994/1963) and Gitta Sereny's *Into That Darkness* (1974), it then moves to more recent accounts such as Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died That Night* (2006) and Alexander Hinton's *Man or Monster?* (2016).

Building on the foundational work of Inga Clendinnen in her book *Reading the Holocaust* (1999), the module departs from the basic premise that there is something important to be learned from looking at perpetrators of genocide. More specifically, this module rests on the conviction that the question of the perpetrator cannot be dissociated from the question of how perpetrators and their acts are represented, and that it is thus important to focus and critically discuss strategies and layers of representation.

The texts under discussion in this module are not only about perpetrators but also, in an important sense, about representation and, moreover, about how such representations are produced, mediated, and received. That is to say, their engagement with the question of the perpetrator is not only thematic but also theoretical and philosophical.

Hence, on one hand, in this module students explore how perpetrators present themselves in these texts, how they talk about their lives, their education, their worldview, and how they justify their actions. On the other, careful attention is paid to the ways in which the authors of

the texts under discussion represent the perpetrators and their encounters with them. The discussion, thus, revolves around the representational strategies, perspective, mediation, and positionality at work on all levels in these texts.

The selection of texts is such that it fosters a critical engagement with common stereotypes or misconceptions about perpetrators as monstrous or evil and foregrounds the key concerns, insights, but also the difficulties and pitfalls involved in understanding perpetrators (such as justification or exculpation, relativism, moralism, or fascination). Furthermore, these texts were written over a timeframe of more than sixty years and in different historical, political, and geographic contexts.

In tandem, they provide a sense of how the engagement with and representation of perpetrators changes over time and across cultures. This diachronic, transnational, and multidirectional approach (Rothberg, 2009) enables teachers and students to ask important questions about changing attitudes, in society and in scholarship, vis-à-vis issues of guilt, responsibility, and complicity, plus the role perpetrators (and representations of perpetrators) play in memory culture and memory politics.

IMPLEMENTING THE MODULE

It has proven productive to begin by confronting the students with a provocative statement about the study of perpetrators. A good example is Saul Friedländer's essay "The 'Final Solution': On the Unease in Historical Interpretation" (1991). One can read the whole text or just use a short passage from it. Either way, the central quote from Friedländer's essay that starts the discussion is the following:

The Final Solution, like any other historical phenomenon, has to be interpreted *in its historical unfolding and within the relevant historical framework*. A priori, therefore, we should be dealing with this epoch and these events as with any other epoch and events, considering them from all possible angles, suggesting all possible hypotheses and linkages. But, as we all know, this is not the case, and, implicitly, for most, this cannot be the case.

No one of sound mind would wish to interpret the events from Hitler's viewpoint. . . . This past teaches us nothing commensurable with the very enormity of the event; it does not help us to understand the present-day world or the future of the human condition. . . . This very perception of limits . . . may indicate that we are possibly facing an exceptional situation that calls for the fusion of moral and cognitive categories in the course of historical analysis as such. (pp. 31–32, 34; italics in original)

First, it is important to guide the students in their reading of this dense passage, working to reconstruct the argument and place it within its historical context (e.g., the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s). Friedländer's argument hinges on an apparent paradox: on the one hand, the Holocaust should be regarded as a historical event, which means that in order to understand its significance, it must be studied within its historical context and from all angles, which would of course have to include the perpetrators' perspective.

On the other hand, the "enormity" of the Holocaust seems to transcend history in some way, rendering established methods at best inadequate and at worst indecent. Added to that is the absolute abhorrence of the perpetrators, which, for Friedländer, is such that even attempting to entertain that perspective would be morally suspect or even dangerous. Hence, the Holocaust and its perpetrators remain somehow beyond historical scrutiny, interpretation, and meaning-making.

Having reconstructed the argument, the next task is to read the text critically and to uncover its unquestioned assumptions and problems. The crucial sentence here is Friedländer's assertion that "no one of sound mind would wish to interpret the events from Hitler's viewpoint." This is a normative statement that calls the whole field of perpetrator studies into question.

But by banning an engagement with the perpetrators' perspective, Friedländer in fact attributes to them a subversive, contaminating, or pathological power. Furthermore, he equates understanding with justification or condoning and hence worries that trying to understand the perpetrators' motivations will somehow lessen the severity of their crimes. This is of course a legitimate concern, and it is precisely the aim of this module to disentangle understanding from justification or exculpation.

Contrary to Friedländer’s assertion, this module posits that this history can indeed teach us something about the “present-day world,” and specifically about the uses of the past in the present. As stated above, this requires careful attention to the way perpetrators are represented and conceptualized in historical and popular discourse. Needless to say, this includes the way that Friedländer himself is “framing” the perpetrators—namely, as dangerous and seductive.

In the three decades since Friedländer published his essay, a lot has changed in both scholarly and public attitudes toward perpetrators. An important watershed moment was the publication of Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men* (2017/1992), which moved the discussion away from a conception of the perpetrators as monstrous and evil and toward an engagement with their situatedness and ordinariness.

These two poles, ordinariness and singularity, mark the boundaries of the field in which subsequent representations of perpetrators can and must be situated. The fact that the same perpetrators can be placed at opposite ends of this spectrum, as exemplified by the Browning-Goldhagen debate in the 1990s (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996), just goes to show how important it is to pay attention to representation.

Here, the tools of literary analysis are helpful. Within the module, students are taught to identify and describe formal and stylistic elements of the texts and how these interact with the content. Relevant questions include the following:

- Who is speaking? How does the narrative voice present and situate itself in relation to the specific history and the perpetrator(s) under discussion?
- How does the perpetrator speak in the text? Through direct or indirect speech—are the perpetrator’s words transcribed and quoted, or merely summarized? How much space does the perpetrator get to speak in the text, and how does this affect our reading?
- What are the setting and context for the encounter (e.g., prison, courtroom, private home, etc.)? How is it described? Is there a frame narrative, and if so, what does it do? How self-reflexive is the narrator’s account, and how open is she or he regarding difficulties and/or surprises encountered?

- How are the perpetrators themselves described (their appearance, voice, mannerisms, behavior, etc.), and how does this description change over the course of the text?
- What are the layers of mediation between the reader and the perpetrator? This can include issues of language and translation, both in the case of interviews (was there an interpreter present?) and with regard to the text itself (was it originally published in a different language?), as well as issues of media and “remediation,” that is, transcription from an aural or visual medium to a textual one and vice versa.
- What is the historical distance between the account and the events in question? That is, how long after the events and over what period of time did the interview(s) or encounter(s) take place, and how long after the encounter(s) was the text written? What is the historical distance between the students and the text and the historical events?
- Does the text refer or respond to other, earlier texts, about perpetrators? If so, how?
- Does the text reflect on the broader historical, social, and political context in which it is being written?

A key principle of the module is its comparative dimension. In other words, although each text is read on its own terms, over the course of the module the differences and similarities between and across texts become important for understanding the changing representation of and societal stance towards perpetrators over time. A comparison between two key texts in the development of perpetrator studies may illustrate this point: The first is Hannah Arendt’s seminal report on the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem (1994). The second is Gitta Sereny’s (1974) equally iconic portrait of Franz Stangl.

Arendt never meets Eichmann in person. She presents herself as a member of the press corps, and, except in the preface and postscript that frame her report, avoids the first person singular. This lends her words an air of authority and seeming objectivity: her integrity and judgment are never in question, and the court itself, not to mention the State of Israel, are not beyond her critique.

She analyzes the trial as a spectacle that involves multiple frames: Eichmann, who is representing himself in both the legal and the metaphorical sense, appears as the man in the glass booth, which constitutes a frame within the frame of the courtroom, which itself is framed by the television cameras broadcasting the proceedings, and so on. Add to this the element of simultaneous translation and remediation, and you have a very complex *mise-en-abîme* structure that places Eichmann himself at an unimaginable distance.

The text is permeated by a bitter sarcasm: Arendt is disappointed in what she sees, and she clearly despises Eichmann. She describes him as a “medium-sized” man, “with receding hair, ill-fitting teeth, and nearsighted eyes, who keeps craning his scraggy neck towards the bench” (Arendt, 1994, p. 5). She calls him a braggard and a liar, and a clown, and constantly makes fun of his “heroic fight with the German language, which invariably defeats him” (p. 48).

His seeming inability to speak in any language other than Nazi clichés and euphemisms is itself a key factor in what Arendt calls the “banality of evil”: he cannot speak or even think for himself. Nor does Arendt allow him to speak in her text. We never “hear” Eichmann speak in the text, and even if we did, all we would hear, Arendt implies, would be Nazi jargon and hateful rhetoric, which she will not repeat. The reader is entirely tethered to her perspective, and thus even as she appears to remain aloof from the proceedings, her authorial voice is omnipresent.

Gitta Sereny’s *Into That Darkness* (1974) is based on a series of interviews she conducted with Franz Stangl, who had been the commandant of two *Aktion Reinhard* extermination camps in Poland. Sereny interviewed him in prison over the course of several days following his trial in 1970. She recounts how at their first meeting, Stangl had immediately launched into the familiar self-justifications he had presented at his trial, but that she had told him that she wasn’t interested in this performance. Instead, what she wanted him to do, was “really to talk to [her]”:

to tell me about himself as a child, a boy, a youth, a man; to tell me about his father, his mother, his friends, his wife and his children; tell me not what he did or did not do but what he loved and what he hated and what

he felt about the things in his life which had eventually brought him to where he was sitting now.

If . . . he decided to help me delve deeper into the past . . . then perhaps we could find some truth together; some new truth which would contribute to the understanding of things that had never yet been understood. . . .

I told him, too, that he had to know from the start that I abhorred everything the Nazis had stood for and done, but that I would promise him to write down exactly what he said, whatever it would be, and that I would try—my own feelings notwithstanding—to understand without prejudice. (Sereny, 1974, p. 23)

Sereny's aim is to paint a portrait of Stangl the man rather than Stangl the mass murderer. There is thus an important difference between her text and Arendt's text, which is of course partly due to the different situations in which they are encountering these perpetrators. Arendt only has access to the "in-court" persona that Eichmann adopts, though we might say that to a certain extent she also underestimates the degree to which Eichmann was playing a role.

Sereny makes a clear distinction between the facts of the case, and the "truth," which is what she says she is interested in. The mere facts may be enough to convict him, but they do not help us to understand *why* and *how* he did what he did. Clearly, this is diametrically opposed to Friedländer's (1991) position.

As far as Sereny is concerned, the only way to learn anything from these events is to get inside the mind of the perpetrator, to ask him about what he was thinking and feeling at the time, what the decisive moments were that set him on the path to becoming a perpetrator, and in how far he'd had—and *known* that he'd had—a choice. These are very important distinctions that are central to what in Holocaust and genocide studies is known as "scope for action" (in German, *handlungsraum*).

In her effort to understand Stangl, Sereny collects as many voices as possible, talking to Stangl's wife and colleagues, to survivors, to historians, and to others. Throughout, she lets Stangl and the others speak for themselves: there are many passages of dialogue and direct speech.

Although the book is nonfiction and strives to be as objective as possible, Sereny also narrativizes her own search for the truth, performing for the reader her own difficulty in coming to terms with Stangl and his

actions. This performative aspect models for the reader both the challenge and also the value of engaging with a perpetrator.

Sereny is very clearly “of sound mind,” to refer back to Friedländer, and, as she emphasizes, her attempt to understand the perpetrator and to see things from his perspective is not to be confused with an attempt to justify or explain away the atrocities Stangl committed. The force of her text hinges in large part on the fact that she is completely secure in her moral standpoint and makes certain that both Stangl and the reader know this.

Although Arendt’s and Sereny’s texts differ fundamentally in their formal and rhetorical character, what unites them is a strong moral compass that acts as a safety net for the reader. Thus, while they each in turn demonstrate that there is something to be learned from looking at perpetrators, Friedländer’s concern about the moral pitfalls of any such engagement must be taken seriously. It is for this reason that this particular combination of texts works well as a starting point for this module.

They both challenge and reinforce each other. Moreover, both Arendt and Sereny have a foundational status, which means that subsequent accounts of encounters with perpetrators of other genocides and atrocities almost invariably refer to one or both of them as precursors. Moving forward, then, the students will be able to identify the key features and development of the perpetrator portrait as a genre that extends across historical and geographic boundaries.

The module has been consistently successful in teaching advanced undergraduate students as well as graduate students in various fields within the humanities in a university setting. It can be done in a condensed manner, as one unit in a larger course in genocide studies.

Alternatively, it can function as a full semester-long tutorial, where students read a wider range of texts. These might include, for example:

- *A Human Being Died That Night*, in which psychologist Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela recounts her interviews with Apartheid killer Eugene de Kock (2006);
- Jean Hatzfeld’s *Machete Season* (2005) about Rwandan *génocidaires*;
- Slavenka Drakulić’s *They Would Never Hurt a Fly* (2004), an account of the war crimes trials against the perpetrators of the Bosnian genocide; or

- Alexander Hinton's (2016) ethnographic portrait of Kaing Guek Eav, a.k.a. Comrade Duch, and the legacy of the Cambodian genocide.

In this longer version, the texts can also be combined with other readings, for example, with excerpts from testimonies or memoirs written by survivors or witnesses, or with texts written by perpetrators, such as autobiographies, testimonies, or other ego-documents. It can also be productive to include fictional representations of perpetrators in novels and films, bearing in mind that this will bring with it a new and challenging set of questions about representation and identification.

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