

Paper Proposal

Primo Levi's 'Shame of the Just' as Resistance to Crimes against Humanity

Jonathan DRUKER, Illinois State University

No one has had more insight into the lessons and legacies of the Holocaust than Primo Levi, a writer/theoretician who used his experience in Auschwitz to develop new philosophical and ethical paradigms that we need to navigate our post-Holocaust world. Among these is the 'shame of the just', an important conceptual innovation embraced and expanded by post-Holocaust thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze.

Levi stated multiple times that the Holocaust shamed not only the victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, but also debased the whole world, depositing a toxic residue that still shames every one of us, even those born after the events. The feeling of shame experienced by 'the just' person does not depend on actual culpability, but on a visceral ethical response to crimes against humanity. In Levi's view, our collective shame in response to the Holocaust constitutes a powerful act of resistance to the tenets of Nazi racial ideology and, by extension, to all forms of racism and discrimination. To feel ashamed—when we learn of the other's suffering at the hands of a criminal regime—is to embrace responsibility, which is the first and necessary antecedent to ethical action and to the defense of human rights.

The first third of this paper describes how Levi's 'shame of the just' is presented in his Holocaust testimonies, and explains the challenges entailed in testifying to shame—both the victims' shame and the witness's. The second and larger part discusses the works of three post-Holocaust thinkers, Zygmunt Bauman, Rosi Braidotti and Deleuze, all of whom extend and revise Levi's 'shame of the just' paradigm to theorize post-Holocaust ethics in the face of new crimes against humanity, and to enable political resistance to state racisms.