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Functionalists vs. Intentionalists: The Debate Twenty Years On *or* Whatever Happened to Functionalism and Intentionalism?

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The Cumberland Lodge Conference of May 1979 was clearly a milestone in the historiography of the “Third Reich.”¹ As we know, the theme of the conference, “The National Socialist Regime and German Society,” provided a platform for sharp disagreement about the place of Hitler in the decision-making processes of the Nazi regime—disagreement which Tim Mason memorably described as between “functionalists” and “intentionalists” examining the Nazi state, thus defining the terms of a debate which occupied a central place in textbooks for years thereafter. The question of whether one should regard the actions of the “National Socialist Regime” as the unfolding of the ideology and expressed intentions of its leadership (and of Hitler in particular), or whether one instead should focus on the dynamics of decision-making processes and the institutional pressures inherent in the Nazi system of government, seemed to dominate discussion of the Nazi state during the 1980s.

Since that time, however, the battle lines have become rather blurred. Already in the first edition of his reasoned and judicious assessment of the historiography, published in 1985, Ian Kershaw concluded that “‘Intention’ and ‘structure’ are both essential elements of an explanation of the Third Reich, and need synthesis rather than to be set in opposition to each other.”² It would seem that in the intervening years Kershaw’s sober judgment has been accepted, as serious historians of Nazi Germany, and not least the historians who since 1979 have done pathbreaking research on the murder of Europe’s Jews, have come to doubt the importance of neither the orders given by the Nazi leadership nor the institutional context in which these orders were given and carried out. The battle cry sounded at Cumberland Lodge now seems past history; in the twenty-three years since the Cumberland Lodge conference and the twenty years since the publication of *Der “Führerstaat”: Mythos und Realität*, the historical landscape has altered considerably. We now know vastly more than we did two decades ago about how the National Socialist

regime functioned, how the Nazi policies of genocide were carried out, how the "Third Reich" administered and exploited wartime occupied Europe, particularly the killing fields of Eastern Europe, how racialism permeated almost all aspects of Nazi politics and the functioning of the Nazi state, how the Nazi wars of annihilation were fought, and about both the degree to which local initiatives were instrumental in shaping the campaigns of mass murder on the ground and the responsibility of Adolf Hitler for the decisions which led to war and genocide. The result is a much better informed, much more detailed and more nuanced picture of the Nazi regime, and most serious historians of the Nazi regime now are to some extent both "intentionalists" and "functionalists" — insofar as those terms still can be used at all.

Thus it might appear that the controversy which erupted at the Cumberland Lodge conference was less earthshaking than assumed at the time and shortly afterwards. Interest in the "intentionalist" versus "functionalist" debate now seems to lie, if it lies anywhere, in that graveyard of historiographical concerns, the English A-level syllabus. One almost might believe that peace had broken out among historians of Nazi Germany — something which on past performance would seem highly implausible, and which is belied by the renewed and often bitter controversies of more recent years. These more recent controversies, I want to suggest, are not unrelated to the fundamental issues raised at Cumberland Lodge.

The shift in the assessment of "functionalism" and "intentionalism" and its removal from the front line of historiographical controversy have been due to a number of interrelated developments which unfolded since we gathered in Cumberland Lodge in 1979. One such is the opening up of new archival sources, particularly in eastern Europe in the wake of the collapse of the former Soviet bloc, which among other things has allowed us to see how decisions were carried out which led to the deaths of millions of people in Galicia, Ukraine, Lithuania, White Russia. Another is the demise of Marxism as a dominant historical paradigm. The appeal of structural explanations revolving around the relationship between capitalism and fascism and of class and class conflict has faded, not least because they appeared inadequate before the principal challenge facing any serious historian of the Third Reich, namely how to explain the greatest crimes committed by human beings in modern history.

In recent years the focus of the writing on Nazi Germany has shifted precisely to these crimes. We now work in an intellectual environment very different from that in which it could be asserted that: "For some time, for many decades, the materialist conception of history — the first-born intellectual child of Marx and Engels — has been growing in self-confidence."³ I quote here the opening sentence of Edward Thompson's essay on "The Poverty of Theory" — which was published in 1978, shortly before the Cumberland Lodge conference — not simply to illustrate how much intellectual assumptions and fashions have changed since that time. I quote it also because Thompson's fierce polemic had been prominent among Tim Mason's reading while he was writing his essay on "Intention and Explanation,"

which begins the collection on the “Führerstaat.” Certainly much of the inspiration behind Mason’s attack on what he labeled “intentionalism” derived from a (Marxist) perspective, which posits an underlying logic to historical processes and that to engage in a “literal reading” of sources about people’s intentions therefore is to miss the point fundamentally. Historical developments, including the horrors unleashed by National Socialism, were to be explained by uncovering their underlying logics. To concentrate on the stated intentions of the main political actors is, from this perspective, to offer no explanation at all.

From the other side of the battle lines of the 1970s came the charge that to focus on some assumed underlying logic, embedded in processes of decision-making and/or allegedly revealed through a materialist conception of history, was to ignore individual human responsibility—and, in the case of the monstrous crimes of Nazism, in effect to be guilty of a dereliction of one’s moral duty. Back in 1976 Karl Dietrich Bracher (who also attended the 1979 conference at Cumberland Lodge) took aim at the “Marxists” and the “realists” for failing to focus on questions of guilt and responsibility and thus inviting “a new underestimation and minimizing of National Socialism” (*eine neuerliche Unterschätzung und Bagatellisierung des Nationalsozialismus*):

While the one group warms over the Marxist theses of the bourgeois-liberal and reactionary character of “Fascism” on the whole, the other—misjudging the political and moral priorities of that time—speaks of the almost normal but in no way well-planned power politics in the Third Reich and expects virtually a new epoch in research on National Socialism to follow from the avoidance of the question of historical guilt. However, this so reduces the ideological and totalitarian dimensions of National Socialism that the barbarity of 1933-45 as moral problem disappears. It could seem almost as if the way has been cleared for a new wave of trivialization or even apologetics.⁴

This moral charge, it seems to me, lay at the core of the disputes which were aired at Cumberland Lodge, and points to the issue which is a matter of controversy no less sharp today than it was a quarter of a century ago. It has resurfaced in some form or other in every major dispute among historians of Nazi Germany for the past twenty years, and is as pressing today as it was in 1976, when Bracher first published the accusation quoted above. It was present in the “Historikerstreit” of the mid-1980s, when it was a weapon used most effectively by figures on the left against the concern expressed by Ernst Nolte about a “past that would not pass away” (and echoed by Franz-Josef Strauß, who warned in 1987 against “letting the vision of a great German past be blocked by the sight-screens of those accused twelve years between 1933 and 1945” and urged that it was time for Germany to “emerge from the shadow of the Third Reich”).⁵ It lay behind the extraordinary attack by Arno Mayer on Detlev Peukert at the 1988 Philadelphia conference on

“Re-Evaluating the Third Reich.”⁶

Moral outrage and self-righteousness motivated Daniel Goldhagen and his supporters, not least when ranged against most of the respected members of the historical profession in Germany and elsewhere who had been hostile to *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. As Robert Leicht, *Chefredakteur* of *Die Zeit*, wrote of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* in his newspaper in September 1996: “This is in the first instance not a historical but rather a moral book — not a report but a judgment.”⁷ And it has surfaced again in the past couple of years, perhaps most stridently in the work of Michael Burleigh, work which is characterized by more than a whiff of moral superiority and about which more below.

Perhaps because we became fixated on the terms “functionalist” and “intentionalists,” we tended somewhat to lose sight of the fundamental accusation of “trivialization” and dereliction of the moral duty of the historian which lay behind the Cumberland Lodge dispute. It was perhaps too easy to assume that at stake was just how to assess the decision-making process in Nazi Germany, and that the entrenched positions were relatively easily correlated to political positions — the “intentionalists” regarded as tending towards the conservative right and the “functionalists” identified more with the left. Thus perhaps we lost sight of what the debate was really about, and continues to be about: morality, and the moral obligations of historians. In this regard things may not have changed all that much in the past quarter of a century. Much of the recent work on Nazi Germany, some of it quite impressive, is also about morality.

As already noted, this is most strikingly the case in the “New History” of the “Third Reich,” recently published with such hype, by Michael Burleigh. Many of the charges and counter-charges tossed around during the late 1970s could be read as a contemporary commentary on Burleigh’s work. For example, one easily could imagine Bracher’s comments being marshaled in support of Burleigh, while the changes leveled in 1979 by Tim Mason against the “intentionalists” could be read as a critique of Burleigh’s approach. (Also, it should be noted, Burleigh has been sharply critical of the approach once championed by Mason, e.g., when he wrote: “The Third Reich was intended to be a racial rather than a class society. This fact in itself makes existing theories, whether based upon modernization, totalitarianism, or global theories of Fascism, poor heuristic devices for a greater understanding of what was a singular regime without precedent or parallel.”)⁸

To suggest how little the battle lines may have changed since 1979, I quote from the first of Tim Mason’s methodological criticisms of the “functionalist” position as he saw it in his Cumberland Lodge contribution:

the intentionalist attack on the incorporation of functionalist types of explanation into our understanding of National Socialism proposes, implicitly but clearly, a retreat by the historical profession to the methods and stance of Burckhardt. [...] Burckhardt saw the historian’s task as to investigate, to classify and to

order, to hate, to love and to warn — but *not*, except upon the smallest of scales, to explain. This approach had almost no explanatory power at all. The attempt at explanation in any and all of the various different traditions of rationalist historiography seems to have been put to one side in intentionalist writing on National Socialism.⁹

Explanation, in the sense used here, included the use of (Marxist) theoretical perspectives which were widely employed twenty-odd years ago but which have rather fallen out of fashion since. Nevertheless, Mason's critique is not at all irrelevant to today's concerns, and it does not require a tremendous amount of imagination to see how this critique might be directed at Burleigh's "New History" of the Third Reich. That book is, in Burleigh's own words, about "what happened when sections of the German elites and masses of ordinary people chose to abdicate their individual critical faculties in favor of politics based on faith, hope, hatred and sentimental collective self-regard for their own race and nation."¹⁰ It is a story of (abdicated) moral responsibility, of a successful "assault on decency" and the "moral breakdown and transformation of an advanced industrial society." Burleigh dismisses the old debates about the alleged "modernization" brought about by Nazism or about the relative importance of intentions and structures in determining Nazi policies with a disdainful air. His approach is the antithesis of that posited by Richard Breitman, who a few years ago in a general essay on the "final solution" asserted (perhaps more in hope than as an observation): "Historians prefer to avoid moral or theological judgments and to find useful analytical concepts."¹¹ Instead, Burleigh's work suggests that the ultimate responsibility of the historian is precisely to take a moral stance, as a warning to the reader. His story is about criminality and morality; his approach is, indeed, "to investigate, to classify and to order, to hate, to love and to warn."

When examining the recent historiography of the Third Reich, it is revealing to note the almost complete divergence between the subjects discussed in detail at Cumberland Lodge (as opposed to the general, overarching debates about "Hitler in the National Socialist Power Structure") and the subjects to which Burleigh devotes close attention in his "New History." The more detailed papers given at Cumberland Lodge concerned various government and Party institutions (the civil service, local and regional government, the *Reichsnährstand*, the SA, etc.), questions of Nazi economic policy, and interest-group politics. These themes lent themselves more to a "functionalist" analysis at the Cumberland Lodge conference, and do not really figure in Burleigh's history. Conversely, the politics of reproduction and eugenics, Nazi policy against the Jews, the all-pervasive, applied racism of the regime, the barbarous conduct of the war, the apocalyptic vision of the Nazis — these are themes which lie at the center of Burleigh's synthesis (and much other recent research) but were conspicuous by their absence at Cumberland Lodge in 1979. The fact that such themes were not discussed at Cumberland Lodge, and that

heated debates about the nature of the Nazi regime could have taken place without much if any reference to them, shows the distance we have traveled in the past couple of decades. Now the monstrous crimes of the Nazi regime are explicitly at the center of our concerns. However, despite this important shift in emphasis, the underlying point at issue has remained the same: the moral stance of the historian and the need to explain. In this sense, the debates of Cumberland Lodge are no less relevant to present-day approaches to the history of Nazi Germany than they were to the concerns and preoccupations which so agitated us twenty years ago.

¹ This paper was originally presented at the Twenty-fifth Anniversary Symposium of the German Historical Institute London, 16 November 2001.

² Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London: Edward Arnold, 1985), 81.

³ E.P. Thompson. "The Poverty of Theory: or An Orrery of Errors," in E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 193.

⁴ "Während die einen die marxistischen Thesen vom bürgerlich-liberalen und reaktionären Charakter des "Faschismus" insgesamt erneuern, sprechen die anderen in Verkenennung der damaligen politisch-moralischen Prioritäten von fast normal anmutender, keineswegs planvoller Machtpolitik im Dritten Reich und erwarten von der Ausblendung der historischen Schuldfrage geradezu eine neue Epoche der Nationalsozialismus-Forschung. Damit aber schrumpft die ideologische und totalitäre Dimensionen des Nationalsozialismus so zusammen, dass die Barbarei von 1933-45 als moralisches Problem verschwindet. Es könnte fast scheinen, als bahne sich eine neue Welle der Verharmlosung oder gar Apologetik an." Karl Dietrich Bracher, "Tradition und Revolution im Nationalsozialismus," in: Manfred Funke, ed., *Hitler, Deutschland und die Mächte. Materialien zur Außenpolitik des Dritten Reiches* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1978 [orig. pub. 1976]), 17-18.

⁵ See Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow. West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 19.

⁶ Most of the contributions to the Philadelphia conference were published as Thomas Childers and Jane Caplan, eds., *Reevaluating the Third Reich* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1993). The attack on Peukert is alluded to in Charles Maier's "Foreword," xiii-xiv.

⁷ "Dies ist in erster Linie nicht ein historisches, sondern ein moralisches Buch—kein Gutachten, sondern ein Urteil," *Die Zeit*, 6 Sept. 1996. Quoted in Werner Bergmann, "Im falschen System: Die Goldhagen-Debatte in Wissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit," in: Johannes Heil and Rainer Erb, eds., *Geschichtswissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit. Der Streit um Daniel J. Goldhagen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998), 135.

⁸ Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ippermann, *The Racial State. Germany 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 306-7.

⁹ Tim Mason, "Intention and Explanation: A Current Controversy about the Interpretation of National Socialism," in: Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker, eds., *Der "Führerstaat." Mythos und Realität. Studien zur Struktur und Politik des Dritten Reiches* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 29.

¹⁰ Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich. A New History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2000), 1.

¹¹ Richard Breitman, "The "Final Solution," in: Gordon Martel, ed., *Modern Germany Reconsidered, 1870-1945* (London: Routledge, 1992), 198.