



A Group Analytic Approach to Understanding Mass Violence: The Holocaust, Group Hallucinosiis and False Beliefs

by Bennett Roth. Routledge, 2019. 155 pp.

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BOOK REVIEW

A Group Analytic Approach to Understanding Mass Violence: The Holocaust, Group Hallucinosiis and False Beliefs by Bennett Roth. Routledge, 2019. 155 pp.

Survivor narratives and descriptions of Holocaust and post-Holocaust psychic effects fill voluminous works of history, research, memoir, poetry. I’ve treasured accounts of survival and transcendence—and the illumination of sequelae of massive trauma by such chroniclers as Garwood (2020), who identified a “traumatogenic triad” (p. 98) of annihilation anxiety, powerlessness and loss. The literature has helped me understand the Holocaust’s impact on my survivor-parents—indelible wounds, rage, terror, despair, dark shadows lurking even during celebratory events.

In the decades since World War II, theorists have vigorously attempted to comprehend the incomprehensible—the grand scale of forced killings, mass displacements and mass murders committed by the Nazi regime. A genocide carried out with the active engagement of a shockingly large proportion of the German populace, stresses Bennett Roth in his extraordinarily insightful book *A Group Analytic Approach to Understanding Mass Violence: The Holocaust, Group Hallucinosiis and False Beliefs*.

Endeavors to understand causes, preconditions and motives for the Holocaust and other genocides have turned up, at best, “inadequate or partial explanations,” Roth laments. The glaring absence of “a set of integrative concepts or causal processes from a group psychoanalytic perspective” sent Roth on an in-depth investigation of Nazi group dynamic behavior. He sought to find out how and why it could “appear rational and necessary for a state regime to engage in the costly activity of eliminating a portion of their non-kin population” (p. 84). He wanted to know how the deadly Third Reich so effectively

indoctrinated a people with lies about Jews being venomous, dangerous and in need of obliteration.

An international lecturer on group therapy, psychoanalysis and Wilfred Bion's work, Roth draws on some of Bion's ideas, particularly theories related to "disturbed thinking" and "hallucinosi" (Bion, 1962) to help understand "mass delusions" and collective "false beliefs." Roth examines "the power and appeal of Nazi propaganda that communicated false beliefs throughout Germany and Europe" (p. 58).

No way, argues Roth, did the Holocaust happen just because "a large group of people hated Jews, Gypsies, Armenians or Gurus and killed them." It occurred as a result of "the conjunction of numerous different large group dynamics and the rise of violent beliefs about the rights of nations to eliminate designated others imagined as a threat or dangerous" (p. 84).

Roth analytically reports on Nazi Germany's enactment of genocide, while exploring the larger question of how mass and state-sponsored violence erupts within societies. He questions how "false beliefs" used to justify atrocities originate and are infused into propaganda that creates "believers" from ordinary human beings. Roth (like many group theorists before him) argues that attaching to a group changes a person's identity and makes the person more vulnerable to pressures to conform to the group's leader, beliefs, and mission. And if a charismatic leader stirs anxiety or fear in people, logical thinking disintegrates, and they likely acquiesce to alleviate fear. Indoctrination to a group belief, true or false, usually unfolds in stages, Roth states, although "zealots" may emerge. Roth lists "proselytizing, recruitment, compliance, internalization and consolidation" (p. 59).

Phenomena surrounding roots and causes of war and violence long plagued me, leading me to peruse books such as Grossman's *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (2009), and Athens's *The Creation of Dangerous Violent Criminals* (1992; both among the sweeping landscape of authors Roth cites) as well as reading Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). I wanted to understand systems of oppression, racism, and colonialism, and also to hold onto a belief in human beings' inherent goodness. From Grossman, I learned about military journalist and historian Brigadier General Samuel Lyman

Atwood Marshall's theory that most soldiers in war don't ever fire their weapons due to an innate resistance (maybe repulsion) to killing. With Athens, I gleaned proof that violent socialization processes, which Athens called "violentization," create violent criminals; psychopathology, genetic inheritance, poverty, and social ills do not.

Linking with Athens' work, Roth hypothesizes that a progressive violentization process may unfold as people are indoctrinated by a charismatic, tyrannical leader such as Hitler. All recent genocides, Roth notes, "occurred with nation state sponsorship with varying degrees of citizen support and participation" (p. 84). The process may begin with part of the elite establishment creating "a violent, dramatic reality" based on an internal or external enemy, real or imagined. If annihilation fear is intensified and harnessed, people may "accept a suitable 'lie' or threatening illusion (hallucinosi)," he explains. The leader or leaders gain power and dominance by presenting a fictional solution to the real or imagined threat posed by the identified "other" (pp. 120–121).

Collusion is at the heart of any "openly repressive" regime, says Roth. "This repressive dynamic seeks or allows the formation of an informative elite group that controls information, monopolizes terror and capitalizes on some of its subjects' willingness to accept lies and to be its violent agents" (p. 121).

Peppered with ideas from wide-ranging theorists, Roth's book contributes much to the psychoanalytic study of state-sponsored mass violence. It offers insight into group dynamics that lead to group violence, potentially helping chart a path for societies seeking to curb or avert violence. Roth's articulation of ideas also lends awareness to present-day experiences of genocide, terrorism, systemic racism, systemic oppression, and displacement. Not least, his discoveries inform clinical work, where practitioners are challenged to help dismantle systems of oppression and decolonize the psychology-related disciplines.

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