
Inside Concentration Camps is a persuasive and challenging book that takes, as its premise, that ‘there’s no way that you’d ever really become nobody for everybody’. In other words, the pervasive sociability of human beings ensures that their ‘social libido’, their desire for social recognition and their perception of social differences and hierarchies, can survive even the most dehumanizing of situations. Here Maja Suderland is guided by Zygmunt Bauman’s proposal that the Holocaust be seen as a rare, yet significant and reliable, test of the ‘hidden possibilities of modern society’ (p. 12). Suderland recognises that the unspoken mission of much Holocaust research is to analyse what is abnormal, monstrous and ‘evil’ in the Holocaust, with a focus on the suffering of the victims and the putatively unique aspects of the Holocaust as an unprecedented caesura in Western history. The problem with this approach, she feels, is that it has led to the conclusion that the concentration camps did not form a ‘society’ in the conventional sense because of the powerlessness of the prisoners and the unprecedented anomie that resulted from the threat or actuality of Nazi violence. However based on her sociologically informed reading of both influential (Primo Levi, Charlotte Delbo) and lesser known prisoner memoirs, Suderland makes a persuasive case that one can talk meaningfully of a ‘prisoner society’ in the camps. She evidences the exceptional dissertation, ‘Social Life in the German Concentration Camps Dachau and Buchenwald’ by the Austrian émigré sociologist Paul Martin Neurath who was imprisoned by the Nazis in 1938, which was completed in 1943 at Columbia University. Suderland, inspired by the ethnographic sensitivity of survivors such as Neurath, Levi, Delbo and others, seeks to ‘understand the points of view of the concentration camp prisoners’ while reconstructing the social relations they describe with the help of sociological theorists, principally luminaries such as Pierre Bourdieu, Zygmunt Bauman, and Irving Goffman. Sensitive to the shortcomings of sociological theories that articulate social agency in functional terms, Suderland’s inspiration is not just analytical but recuperative, to bring forth the ‘polyphonic lament of the people who were imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps’, audible once again as ‘improvised melodies’ in an unwritten musical score (p. 6).

Suderland’s contention is that even in the concentration camps there was a ‘social life that corresponded to that of a normal society in many respects’ (p. 7). The point is that a human society continued to exist in the minds of its members as well as to express itself in the ‘habitus’ of both the prisoners and sometimes their SS guards. Contrary to the intentions of their tormentors who denuded them of their name, clothing, and worldly possessions, the prisoners continued to articulate themselves as social beings with entrenched, physiologically incorporated schemes of ‘perception, appreciation, and action’, those preferences, inclinations, and tastes.
expressed in the individual’s mental and physical bearing. One can talk about the prisoners’ habitus as a ‘practical sense’ steering the actions and judgments of individuals (p. 239). Incapable of quashing the sociality of individuals the concentration camps remained outposts of social space in which its aspirations and conflicts continued to be played out. Suderland is wary of accepting tout court any conception of the concentration campus as a disorienting, senseless counterworld beyond the universe of meaning. She notes that the classification system accorded to the prisoners, in which prisoners were identified by a colour-coded badge on their clothing as Jewish, criminal, political prisoner, homosexual, and ‘Gypsy’ was largely accepted by the prisoners themselves. This acceptance was based both on prior social differentiations and the practical requirements of accelerated orientation in the camps; thus one can talk meaningfully of the ‘distorted reflection’ of normal social space in the camps. Indeed the hazardous uncertainties of camp life, in which imminent death was largely unspoken but a palpable threat, only intensified the xenophobic habitus and ‘basic social concepts’ of the majority of prisoners. Anti-Semitic attitudes were rife in which a highly differentiated Jewish prisoner population continued to be regarded as a distinct social ‘caste’, predatory, treacherous, and devious; the social reality of ‘Gypsies’, mediated by mythological ideas of their savage and faithless proclivities, was broadly accepted. Even the esteemed writer Charlotte Delbo records that ‘broiled meat’ offered by ‘untrustworthy’ Gypsy prisoners was never accepted lest it turn out to be human flesh (p. 171). Homosexual prisoners, another centripetal or ‘fragmentary’ group encompassing a variety of social classes who are ‘severely underrepresented in the culture of remembrance’, were aggressively ostracized (p. 177). Their inclinations threatened a system in which urges could be satisfied and pederastic relationships between kapos and younger male prisoners widely tolerated as long as homosexual acts were regarded as an ‘emergency’ measure in an all male environment.

Yet if the habitus of many European prisoners demonstrated a disenchanting complicity with Nazi regimes of knowledge and power, it also resisted Nazi attempts to collapse traditional hierarchies and the solidarities they produce. The homosexual Austrian concentration camp survivor Josef Kohout (pen name Heinz Heger) reports on prisoners continuing to show great respect towards a German priest imprisoned as a homosexual or seeking to ease the suffering of their former professors (p. 252) who they continued to venerate. Furthermore emasculating violence towards the men by the SS and their assault on feminine dignity in shaving the heads of the women and forcing them to strip naked upon disembarkation was in many respects an utter failure. Men continued to defend their ‘honour’ in the camps by viewing their assailants more as mad dogs than human combatants, regarding even the smallest acts of subversion or solidarity as contributing to an ‘underground’ movement of ‘resistance’ to their tormentors; in the women’s camps, such small acts as swapping imagined recipes or improvising cultural performances contributed to an inviolable existence of ‘camp families’ or a ‘camp sisterhood’. In one of the more interesting discussions in the book Suderland notes the phenomenon of a ‘divided habitus’ amongst the SS camp guards, who, in their occasional appreciation for the prisoner’s cultural performances and artistic pursuits, their expressions of loyalty and care towards ‘their’ Jewish functionaries, and their toleration of a thriving black
market, were capable of unintentionally dealing with so-called “‘sub-humans’” on equal terms for brief moments (p. 147). Such was the strength of a prior social world in which both SS and their prisoners held many social positions that the doctrinaire substratum of race and nationality was not always the dominant logic in every situation.

While Suderland’s book is at times repetitive, cumbersome in its organization, and is perhaps overly inclined to detect the desire for social recognition in the manifold coping mechanisms of the prisoners, I value its humane and redemptive insight. The Nazis were singularly unable to annihilate the prisoners’ ‘existing habitus’, to destroy the ‘human beings within the people’ (p. 242).

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