

movements elsewhere. What, for example, was the nature of Socialist Sunday Schools in Great Britain, their aims, curricula, pedagogy, their connection with the parent Labour Party and the British state? Teitelbaum, of course, cannot be faulted for shirking that comparative study, which by its very nature must be a collective endeavor. A good beginning on the educational history of the US left has been made, and the work must now go on in a broader context.

Marvin E. Gettleman

SOFSKY, WOLFGANG. *Die Ordnung des Terrors: Das Konzentrationslager*. S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt/M. 1993. 390 pp. DM 49.80.

After the history of horror, are we now to have its sociology? Is that not to reduce the incomprehensible to the banal? Anyone asking such – admittedly defensive – questions ignores the fact that the first book on the German concentration camps was Eugen Kogon's *Der SS-Staat*, a book that not only related "what was" but claimed to analyse the social reality of the concentration camp system. With the title of his book Wolfgang Sofsky hints at the first section of Kogon's *Der Terror als Herrschaftssystem* ("Terror as a System of Power"), which, incidentally, emerged from an essay for the German Sociological Conference in 1948. In the blurb Sofsky's publishers credit his book with "a relevance similar to Kogon's earlier analysis of the 'SS state'". That is a strong claim, but not out of place. I for one have no doubt that before long this work will be counted among the classic studies of the period.

First I should point out what Sofsky does *not* do. He does not describe the role of the concentration camps within the overall framework of National Socialist power, nor does he talk about the role of concentration and death camps in different phases of Nazi rule. In particular, he does not deal with the question of how the mass murder of European Jews happened or could have happened. He describes the social reality of the concentration camps themselves. The book would be worthy of recommendation even if it were just a systematizing synopsis of historical works, memoirs and monographs. But the author goes beyond compiling descriptions and interpretations. By condensing the material available to him, he succeeds – in four chapters: "Space and time", "Social structures", "Labour" and "Violence and death" – in characterizing a piece of social reality which functioned according to certain laws that are only discernible through analysis.

Talking of "laws" may seem inappropriate here. What should those laws be other than a framework for the amalgam of despotism, chicanery and murder that constituted the reality of the camps even where they served, among other things, as reservoirs of labour? This in fact appears to be the fundamental problem with any sociological analysis of the concentration camps. What is to be "analysed"? Sofsky writes: "Excessive violence was commonplace in the concentration camps. Civil society's laws prohibiting homicide had been abolished. [. . .] Where terror is let loose and where its servants need not fear retribution, an essential constraint disappears. Violence, which is always a possible course of human action, has a free hand. The perpetrators never had to torture and kill, but they constantly had the opportunity to do so, alone or in groups, in all situations, casually or impulsively, with or without rage, with or

without purpose." Where the only rule is the lack of rules, reality disintegrates up into separate events which can be reported if one gets the chance, written down if one is fortunate enough to survive. But would that not be the subject of history, which preserves the specific, and would sociology, aiming at the general, not be out of place here? Ralf Dahrendorf once made a similar comment about National Socialism as a whole.

When, for instance, Sofsky traces the origin of particular acts of violence in the camps to military drill or punishment practices or to particular traditional practices of aggravated imprisonment, he does point out that they were completely distorted in the camps. They cease to serve a specific purpose, such as the preparation of an individual or a group for an end prescribed by the institution, and instead turn into excesses of violence. "Excessiveness", Sofsky argues, "breaks the confinements of regulated force. Excessiveness is not punishment, torture or execution. [. . .] It is power raging against the helpless. It is rooted in a situation of omnipotence. Through excessiveness the perpetrator proves his triumph over the other. He shows how free he is. Excessiveness is violence for its own sake, terror as such. It has no purpose and is not a means to an end." The analysis of power is usually the analysis of its foundations, its origins and its limits. But can one analyse omnipotence? When analysing the terror of a regime, the end it serves is usually analysed. What is to be analysed in "power as such" or "violence for its own sake"? And even if one agreed with Sofsky's description, would that not constitute a criticism of the attempt to understand the system of the concentration camps from within?

But Sofsky knows exactly what he is doing. His reply would be that this is the only way to understand, and any attempt to explicate the reality of the camps in terms of their purpose within the political and economic structures of Nazi Germany would be misleading. The historian would argue that, due to muddled competences and an odd mixture of bureaucracy and despotism, very few external aims and prescriptions were realized in a way envisaged by those who formulated them. But more important is the fact that every prescription that entered the world of the camps was distorted in such a way that it became an indistinguishable part of a camp's world. And that in turn was characterized by one thing: absolute power.

It is well known that the concentration camps played a part in German economy. "The list of beneficiaries reads like a trade directory of the German industry." But "power would not be absolute if it were constrained by demands of objectivity and productivity. The camp economy was political economy in a radical sense. Power dominated the economy and defined the importance of labour." For this reason Sofsky does not accept the term "forced" or "slave" labour either. "The inmates were forced to work, but the work was most of all a means of torture. [. . .] However cruelly masters may have dealt with their slaves, the death of a slave was always a loss. The trauma of the inmates' lives or their deaths, on the other hand, was a victory of power."

What sounds merely aphoristic in a review is the result of careful analysis in Sofsky's book. His elaboration of the concept of "absolute power", consistently the focus of the detailed analysis, is a successful attempt to grasp analytically that which evades analysis. It is worth noting that the author does not belittle his material in any way, nor does he succumb to the temptation of presenting his results in hyperbolic terms. Reality does not need exaggerating. Sofsky's

writing is always calm, often cold, but never routine and it always avoids the many pitfalls of jargon.

In an introduction preceding the four chapters mentioned above Sofsky explains the concept of “absolute power” in terms of certain characteristics. Some of these I would like to highlight. “Absolute power”, he writes, “is organized power”; it is not founded in tradition, custom or legitimation but in organization and violence. “Absolute power rids itself of the constraints of ideological legitimation”; power that has to legitimate itself is not absolute; ideology is thus relegated to a secondary role. “Absolute power is absolute power of labeling”; it is not the outcome of a social order, it orders the social fabric. “Absolute power is graded power”; the delegation of power, combined with the granting of the privilege of despotism, makes that power ubiquitous; no gaps are left in the control structure. Normally the delegation of power creates mutual dependencies which can be expected to undermine “absolute power”. These dependencies were present, there was corruption and bribery. But it hardly impinged on the system as such; and where it did, this was more than balanced by the ever wider application of unrestrained violence.

Sofsky calls the concentration camps “laboratories of violence”, quoting Hannah Arendt, who writes in *Origins of Totalitarianism*: “The concentration and death camps serve the apparatus of totalitarianism as laboratories in which the fundamental claim of totalitarian systems that people are completely controllable is to be tested. The aim is to investigate what is possible and to prove that simply everything is possible.” Arendt sees the concentration camps at the end of a long analysis of social trends and as a seemingly unreal extreme of “totalitarian rule” rather than as its most complete expression. Sofsky, however, sees the camps as an exercise in a system of domination which had never before been realized in such a radical way. “The most direct form of absolute power is sheer violence. Through violence it shows its overpowering force. Absolute power of action does not threaten, it injures, mutilates, kills. [. . .] Violence was not a last resort in the camps, it was not the system’s final throw because all else had failed. Political systems generally apply violence sparingly because it creates disorder and puts citizens’ loyalty at risk. Absolute power is fundamentally different.”

Its absoluteness shows itself most blatantly in one characteristic. Absolute power is not master over life and death like other forms of rule but it “erases the line of demarcation between life and death”. It changes its victims into corpses on call. This status is not relieved by any other purpose (an economic one, for instance) to which they may be exposed to. In the world outside the concentration camps people are objects serving this or that purpose and they are subjects in so far as they accept that purpose or rail or revolt against or are subjugated by it. Suffering, destruction and the threat of murder are the extreme means available to a ruler to ensure subjugation; if he kills he has already lost his object. In the concentration camp, to quote Arendt again, “the world is turned upside down”. It is an institution for keeping people in a certain state for a limited period of time, at the end of which there is death: death by starvation, sickness, torture or murder. This place is not useful, but it uses the state’s interest in impressing the masses through terror and releases a few victims for the purpose of demonstration. It uses the interest of industrial enterprises in a workforce devoid of protection and without solidarity in order to kill through labour.

Why? This question is not addressed directly in Sofsky's book, but he shows it becomes superfluous. "Absolute power aims at increasing itself. It is impelled by totality. It has fulfilled itself when there are no exceptions. [. . .] The perfect subjects of this power are those which it has killed." Questions focusing on the task of analysing relative power are meaningless in the face of absolute power. Absolute power has its own rationality, which appears insane from the point of view of any other social rationality. The special, one could call it negative, rationality of absolute power consists in overpowering all other rationalities and subduing them. A system of absolute power therefore seems irrational, but is still devastatingly effective as an instrument of terror because it minimizes the possibility of developing counterstrategies based on the assumption and application of conventional rationalities.

Finally, one could look at a possible consequence which Sofsky, wisely confining himself to the sociological analysis, only hints at. He describes a social institution which had made the transformation of persecution into destruction its organizing principle. So the order for the systematic destruction of all European Jews and Romanies was issued to an organization prepared for such a task and which only had to acquire the technical means to carry out the genocide. This one purpose evaded distortion by the special rationality of absolute power, because it encountered an institution which fitted this purpose like no other. Sofsky ends his reflections on the relationship between terror, negative rationality, absolute power and a policy of genocide thus: "Unlike all previous forms of power, absolute terror produces absolutely nothing. Its actions are completely negative, a work of vanishing without trace. It realizes itself in the complete destruction of man."

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CHANDLER, DAVID P. *Brother Number One. A Political Biography of Pol Pot*. Westview Press, Boulder [etc.] 1992. xv, 254 pp. Ill. \$24.95; £16.95.

Although most publications on communism in Cambodia offer biographical information about Saloth Sar, alias Pol Pot, no formal biography had been written until now. David Chandler, a writer and editor of several studies on communist Cambodia, is certainly well qualified to fill this gap. But the lack of sources would appear to be an insurmountable obstacle. Pol Pot's biography is set against a backdrop of a communist movement which from the outset put few of its activities on paper; and Pol Pot himself is almost obsessively secretive. The available texts of his speeches and other interventions can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and in various meetings with foreign journalists he revealed almost nothing about himself. This shortage of traditional, printed, sources – which have proved valuable in the preparation of biographies of Eastern European communist leaders, for instance – can be compensated in part by interviews with eyewitnesses. This genre of historical material, of necessity frequently resorted to by all students of Cambodian communism, raises issues of bias, failing memory and mutually conflicting testimonies. But besides the usual problems there is the specific complication that, as Chandler himself admits, his informants were never prepared "to associate the person they had