

Knowing the 'Unknowable'? : Methodological Concerns of Understanding the Holocaust through Testimony

Abstract

Much has been written about the inadequacies of traditional discourses of history in understanding the ethico-political and most importantly the human dimensions of the Holocaust and the need to consider testimonies, oral accounts, and other 'sources' to comprehend it or at least make an attempt at comprehension. One way of looking at it would be to invariably study the gaps, the silences, the non linearity of narratives, the inevitable concerns with 'truth'. But the lacuna – inherent in the repeated insistence of the survivors on the essentially 'unimaginable' or seemingly enigmatic nature of the event poses both epistemological and ethical concerns. This paper attempts to engage with the methodological issues involved in conceptualising the Holocaust through the Testimony. The paper studies the epistemological concerns behind positing the *testimony* as a conceptual category, in opposition to the Foucaultian notion of the *archive* in Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* and examines the figure of the *Muselmann* – the absolute witness who paradoxically is incapable of bearing witness as a product of Nazi biopolitics. Drawing on Agamben's reading of the Foucaultian notion of 'biopower', particularly in the context of totalitarian regimes, the paper asks whether the effect of such a biopolitics is in the ultimate erasure of the boundaries between the human and non-human.

Keywords: Testimony, Archive, Biopower, *Muselmann*, Witness.