Interpretation
A Journal of Political Philosophy

Winter 2025 *Volume 51* Issue 2

ISSN 0020-9635

Interpretation

A Journal of Political Philosophy

Inquiries ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798

email interpretation@baylor.edu

Piotr Nowak, *After Jews: Essays on Political Theology, Shoah and the End of Man*. New York: Anthem, 2023, 234 pp.

Wojciech Engelking
University of Warsaw
w.engelking@wpia.uw.edu.pl

In Paul Auster's *Winter Journal*, there is a scene describing his move from New York to Paris. In the apartment he rented in the 15th arrondissement, there was a piano that his then-partner often practiced on. The other tenants were not pleased with this, particularly the downstairs neighbor with the fittingly musical name of Madame Rubinstein. When she came to complain, Auster's first impulse was to scold and curse her, but he chose a different approach: "How sad it is, you said, how terribly sad and pathetic that two Jews should be fighting like this; think of all the suffering and death, Madame Rubinstein, all the horrors our people have been subjected to, and here we are shouting at each other over nothing; we should be ashamed of ourselves." In this brief scene taking place in the 1970s, Auster, a Jew whose year and place of birth spared him from the Holocaust, reflects on Europe's spiritual state in the aftermath of the Shoah—an event regarded in the Western imagination not merely as a genocide, but as both unprecedented and foundational. The post-1945 world is not merely the world, but a world "after Jews," irrevocably stripped of something essential.

The world in question is explored in the collection of essays bearing this very title—the second English-language work by Polish philosopher Piotr Nowak, following *The Ancients and Shakespeare on Time: Some Remarks on the War of Generations*, published by Brill in 2016. Nowak, a lecturer at the

University of Białystok, a visiting scholar at Roosevelt University in Chicago and the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, as well as the deputy editor of *Kronos*, Poland's largest political-philosophical journal, poses two fundamental questions. First, how was the Holocaust possible? Second, what impact did it have on the European soul? He examines these questions through the works of thinkers for whom the Holocaust was either a foundational theme (e.g., Jean Améry, Primo Levi), a catalyst leading to other central intellectual concerns (such as the apocalypse, for Jacob Taubes, or the concept of the scapegoat for René Girard), or a backdrop against which their thinking assumed new dimensions. The uniqueness of his answer becomes particularly evident when contrasted with two other responses to the first question that prevail in Western thought.

The first explanation, advanced in recent years by Timothy Snyder in *Bloodlands* and *Black Earth*, argues that the Holocaust and totalitarianism stemmed from the destruction of post-Enlightenment institutions of the modern European state. According to this "Snyderian school," rational institutions serve as a check on humanity's destructive instincts, allowing man to remain, as Kant described, "a crooked piece of wood"—flawed but not inherently dangerous. The second explanation, rooted in the thought of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and later expanded by Zygmunt Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, offers a sharply contrasting perspective. It asserts that the Holocaust was not the result of the collapse of institutions but rather their perfection. This perspective holds that the Holocaust was the ultimate manifestation of a rationality that subordinated humanistic values to utilitarian logic, reducing individuals to *homo oeconomicus*—rational agents pursuing calculated goals at the expense of morality.

Nowak rejects both these answers—which can be termed historiosophical and philosophical—by declaring his intention to analyze, as a theologian, the forces that shaped the world "after Jews," a world both deprived of something and yet alive with the presence of its absence, defined by the fact that what once was is now no longer there. However, his approach is not rooted in the traditions of Richard Rubinstein's or Joseph Ratzinger's theology but aligns instead with the discipline of political theology. At first glance, this might suggest an affinity with Carl Schmitt, whose concept of the state of exception is often invoked by thinkers associated with the Snyder school. However, *After Jews* reveals Nowak's allegiance to a rival strand of political-theological thought, as outlined by Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde. Unlike Schmitt, who

interprets political concepts as secularized theological ideas, Nowak identifies a purely theological concept as key to understanding the Holocaust. This concept is the devil—standing for a force that resists rationalization and represents the inexplicable.

"'It was the devil!'" writes Alain Besançon, a witness of those times. "'He was the one who communicated his inhuman personality to his subject.' . . . It is good that a theological category—the concept of the devil, Antichrist—is returning to the philosophical, and, more broadly, social and political discourse. The devil, Antichrist, is not just a metaphor or a creature with a limp in the left leg and charred wings; it is rather the atmosphere we live in." Underlying the concept of the devil in Nowak's essays is the fundamental impossibility of understanding Shoah and the impossibility of preventing it and its repetition. In contrast to Bauman, who sees the cause of Shoah in the dominance of secular categories in the European mind, devoid of any metaphysical component, but also in contrast to Snyder, who sees these categories as a dam against totalitarianism, Nowak states: irrationality, as the inexplicable, cannot simply be eradicated. It is rooted in modern institutions, and what causes them to turn into their terrible degeneration is what the devil would be responsible for in theological thinking, and over which man has only limited influence: circumstances.

An example of this rooting is Nowak's interpretation of the refugee crisis in 2015. "I am afraid of their presence in the Old Continent . . . because I am afraid of their fate; it is for fear not of them but for them. History tends to repeat himself, and not in the least as a farce. In short, they will die here, be eliminated, trampled on, pressed into European soil, because the conditions for the possibility of Shoah have not been eradicated. . . . The work of destruction can always repeat itself in a new form, in fact at any moment." According to the paradigm proposed by Nowak, in the face of the unexpected, rational, Western institutions are at the end of their ability to act effectively. This end leads them to reformulate their capacities in order to be effective even under conditions of destabilization. Invented to regulate normal times, institutions can and must adapt to their negation. Reformulated, they are still rational, but their rationality is not the rationality that organizes their operation in normal times. It is not the modern Western institutions that are responsible for the examples of inhuman politics, but the times in which they operate, over which man has no control.

For Nowak, the world after Jews is one that sought to achieve such control, exemplified by the way the Holocaust experience was used by the state

of Israel to shape its spiritual condition. Nowak addresses this theme in a text dedicated to Primo Levi and the distinct historical contexts in which two of Levi's essays were written.

> *If This Is a Man* was written right after leaving the camp; *The Truce* came out two years after Eichmann's trial, in a very different reality. . . . Beginning in the 1960s, namely, after Eichmann's hanging, survivors of the Shoah were gradually equaled in being with others. They no longer had to blame themselves for their survival. On moral grounds, a difference between them and the creators of the state of Israel was annulled. . . . [What replaced the difference was] the cult of the victim, slowly emerging at the time.

The project of the world after Jews, envisioned as one in which the irrational cannot happen again, Nowak argues, became a universalist one.

The current moment, which sees the publication of Nowak's book in English—at a time when campuses in the United States, the United Kingdom, and even Poland are filled with demonstrators chanting anti-Zionist slogans—raises the question whether the project has succeeded, and if not, why not. Nowak poses this question differently: Can one rationally explain why some universalisms are politically successful and others are not? He writes about this problem by reflecting on the most extensive universalism in the history of the West: that of Paul the Apostle. In trying to convince the Jews of Rome of their special role—as opposed to that of the Greeks—in the project of salvation, Nowak argues, Paul refers to their covenant with God: "God took a liking to the people of Israel, and His decision will remain inexplicable, just like love—we do not know why God loved the Jews, nor do we know what for. . . . The same conclusion—that God's reasons cannot be revealed, let alone translated into human reason—comes from Jacob Taubes who contemplates the question why God hated Esau and took a liking to Jacob already in their mother's womb." Thus, just as there is no rational explanation within Nowak's theological framework for why the Holocaust occurred, there is also no explanation for why the project of the state of Israel initially succeeded—or why it is now faltering in the West, precisely at the moment Nowak's book reaches American readers.

Part of this inability to comprehend is also the answer that Nowak, in the spirit of his previous book on the war of generations, references in his discussion of the work of Jean Améry (and, in part, its interpretation by W. G. Sebald). "The struggle between youth and old age, the war of generations is, according to Améry, one more incarnation of totalitarianism—a movement

that ruins everything to start anew, from scratch. In this sense, in this strange world designed for the young, old age is a stigma similar to the yellow patch that had to be worn by every Jew in Europe." But even a circumstance such as the interchangeability of generations and the resulting discord between them has no rational explanation—apart from the biological one—and in theological terms it also appears to be a diabolical affair.

Coming to terms with this inability to comprehend why the Holocaust happened and what the world after Jews is makes the latter an apocalyptic reality, one in which "'no one acts but rather everything happens,' writes Taubes. 'One is overwhelmed by passivity. "The drawbridge comes from the other side," so there is no point striving for salvation.'"

At the same time, however, there is a passage in Nowak's essays that shows another dimension of inexplicable circumstances—when he mentions the Jewish cemetery on Okopowa Street in Warsaw. It survived the entire occupation, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the communist era; it is still a functioning cemetery. No one knows how it happened; it just did. From a theological point of view—Nowak says—circumstances are not inexplicable solely when they involve horror.