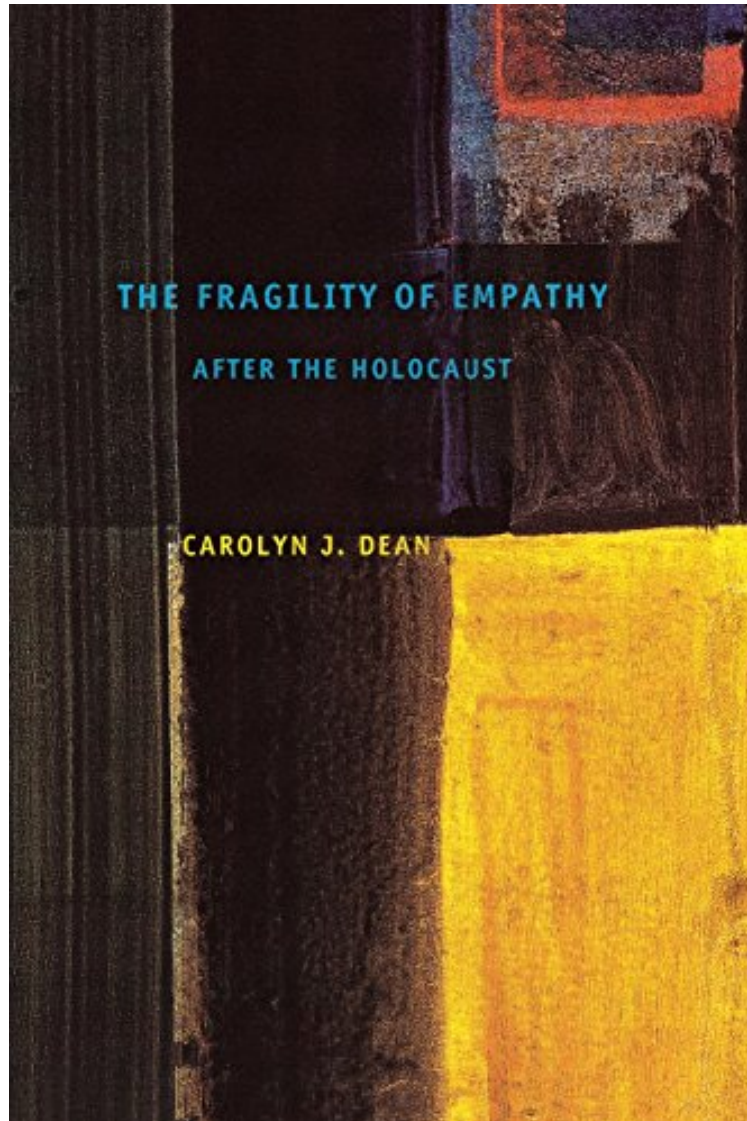


(Pdf free) The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust

The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust

Carolyn J. Dean

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Carolyn J. Dean : The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust:

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Better Title: Yet Another Holocaust Book. Features Holocaust Fatigue, and the Question About the Nazis and HomosexualityBy Jan PeczkisThe title of this book is misleading. It makes the reader suppose that this book is about how the moral capital of Jews, caused by gentile sympathy because of the Shoah, is slipping away. Instead, this book is not about that at all. Instead, it rehashes the standard fare of books of this type.HOLOCAUST FATIGUEAuthor Carolyn J. Dean suggests that the constant exposure of people to the

Holocaust, far from creating and sustaining a Never Again! atmosphere, actually dulls them to violence and to the suffering of others. However, isn't desensitization a characteristic of modern mass media IN GENERAL? (For instance, wasn't the constant featuring of homosexuals, on TV, part of a strategy of desensitizing the general population to it?). The author goes further. She suggests that, in a sense, the media portrayals of the Holocaust have become a sort of pornography (p. 22) in that they both titillate the viewer (to see the violence), and then end up dulling the viewer (to violence) in much the same way that pornography causes both short-term titillation and long-term desensitization in sexual matters. As an example, she cites Jerzy Kosinski's *THE PAINTED BIRD*, which had been widely criticized as a pornography of violence. (p. 24). There are other, unsaid implications of Holocaust fatigue. For instance, we often hear that other peoples who had experienced genocide--such as the Poles--merely need to "work harder" and "get the word out". This is unrealistic. Even if Poles somehow acquired the level of influence, in American society, that Jews enjoy, the American public, already desensitized by Holocaust fatigue, would scarcely be receptive to information about the Nazi German genocide of the Poles. *THE STANDARD DOUBLE STANDARD* Author Carolyn J. Dean features the ideas of Daniel Goldhagen, who suggested that Germans as a whole share complicity in the Holocaust (pp. 45-on), even though only a small fraction of them were actively involved in it. However, exactly the same could be said about collective Jewish complicity in the crimes of Communism, even though only a small fraction of Jews were actively involved in it. The author (p. 80) repeats the canned complaint that the people of Poland, Ukraine, Japan, etc., see themselves as victims and not victimizers while, just as predictably, exempting the Jews from this same standard. *JEWS IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC* Interestingly, the author touches on Jewish influence (even dominance) in Weimar Germany. She comments, And he [Daniel Goldhagen] also ignores the gains Jews made in Germany before 1933 and the tremendous social and cultural status they enjoyed; thus he implied that they remained willfully blind to the virulent hatred all around them. (p. 48). [But hasn't it been elsewhere suggested that Jews sometimes have a blind spot about legitimate gentile objections to their conduct?] The fate of German Jews varied. Most of those German Jews who were married to German gentiles ended up surviving WWII. (p. 83). *WAS HITLER GAY?* The title of this book does not convey, to the reader, the extensive attention that the author pays to the relationship of Nazism and homosexuality. (pp. 107-on). Dean also puts it in historical context. For instance, during a series of famous 1906-1909 trials against some of Kaiser Wilhelm II's advisors, leading Jewish sexologists such as Magnus Hirschfeld accused these advisors of homosexuality. (p. 116). Interestingly, author Carolyn J. Dean (p. 188) cites Dagmar Herzog and his *SEX AFTER FASCISM*. Herzog showed that the notion of the Nazis being sexually repressed did not emerge until after 1966, and was a retrospective fantasy about Nazism. She also contended that Nazism challenged strict bourgeois morality while paying lip service to middle-class sexual conventions.

When we are confronted with images of and memoirs from the Holocaust and subsequent cases of vast cruelty and suffering, is our impulse to empathize put at risk by the possibility of becoming numb to horror? Carolyn J. Dean's provocative new book addresses the ways we evade our failures of empathy in the face of massive suffering: Has exposure (or overexposure) to representations of pain damaged our ability to feel? Do the frequent claims that artistic representations of extreme cruelty are pornographic allow us to dodge the real issues that we must confront in attempting to come to terms with suffering? Does an excess of terror place constraints on compassion? Dean examines the very different representations of suffering found in visual media, history writing, cultural criticism, and journalism that grapple with the assumption that Americans and Western Europeans have been rendered numb and their appropriate human responses blunted by the events of the past century. *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust* will be of interest to all readers concerned with contemporary "victim culture," Holocaust representation, and humanism.

"Carolyn Dean brings to bear her impressive skills as an intellectual historian to trace changing attitudes toward the representation of the suffering, vulnerable body. *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust* is a wonderful example of the ways in which a certain kind of close critical reading can open up new perspectives on a field one thinks one knows. Dean takes what seem commonplace observations (the idea, in this case, that our capacity for empathy has been exhausted by the brutalities of genocide and world war) and asks how they operate to create explanations that avoid rather than confront what has happened." Joan Wallach Scott, author of *Gender and the Politics of History* "Carolyn J. Dean has written an original and very thought-provoking study of emotional and intellectual numbness as a response to the Holocaust. Her analysis of various case studies of the failure of empathy, particularly the association of Holocaust images with pornography and the controversy over Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, is rigorous and profound." Ruth Franklin, Senior Editor, *The New Republic* "In her important new book, Carolyn J. Dean explores the complex relations between perceptions of a diminished modern capacity for empathy and a constellation of associated themes, including the so-called pornography of violence, the status of indifference as an often invoked category calling for critical historical investigation, and the search for an appropriate ethic of response to the Holocaust and other extreme events. Her thought-provoking, cross-disciplinary analysis should be of widespread interest." Dominick LaCapra, Cornell University, author of *History in Transit: Experience, Identity,*

Critical Theory About the Author Carolyn J. Dean is Charles J. Stille Professor of History and French at Yale University. She is the author of several books, including *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust* and *Aversion and Erasure: The Fate of the Victim after the Holocaust*, both from Cornell.