On the Gray Zone

by Anna Bravo

You could write a book on the uses and misuses of the term gray zone. Then you would probably find out that there is no other term that has met with such luck and has been twisted around so much. I wonder if its original meaning has even been lost in the shuffle. This would be unfortunate because this term has an extraordinary potential to make us reconsider the past and open up new perspectives on the present. Since this site is not meant only for experts, I would like to go over the basic principles of this concept.

A reflection on totalitarian domination in the Lager

The discussion of the gray zone is not just another discussion on power in general. I think that Levi would not have been so happy with such an all-encompassing interpretation of the term, one that could be extended indefinitely. Precisely, the gray zone is a reflection on the nature of total domination in the accomplished form that it took on in the Lager. The topics of “complicity” and responsibility are tied in with those circumstances and this should help us never forget the extreme and uninterrupted pressure that was inflicted upon the prisoners. Coining the term, Primo Levi focuses on the outlines of power in the concentration camp system – the “zone of the ambiguity which radiated out from regimes based on terror and obsequiousness.” It includes a multifaceted area of roles and functions that the Nazis invented to manage the Lagers using a minimum of German personnel. They aimed to compromise the prisoners who performed those functions in exchange for advantages that at times were considerable. Something like this took place in the Gulag, as was described by Varlam Shalamov e Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, among others.

In The Drowned and the Saved, Levi describes the gray zone in this way: “the hybrid class of the prisoner-functionary constitutes its armature and at the same time its most disquieting feature. It is a gray zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge.” These prisoner-functionaries exist to maintain order in concentration camps based on a system of punishments and privileges, based on the

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1 Hannah Arendt wrote: “As long as all men have not been made equally superfluous – and this has been accomplished only in concentration camps – the ideal of totalitarian domination has not been achieved.” The Origins of Totalitarianism (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1973), cited in The Portable H.A. (N.Y. Penguin, 2003), p. 137.
4 DS, p. 42.
consent or tolerance of the guards or other prisoners higher in the ranks of the deportees, or, in some cases, the consent of the commandant. Something like this occurs in other all-encompassing institutions studied by Goffman. Yet, this ambiguity, linguistic hybridism, and ill-defined bordering make up something that does not imply vagueness at all.

In describing the gray zone, Levi distinguishes among the various positions and attitudes of its inhabitants, but he does not use the categories of social and psychological research – class, caste, culture, temperament, pulsations, or ties to politics or religious creeds – categories that he believes significant but used by other authors. Instead, Levi chose to start from inside, from a minute analysis focusing on life and death in the Lager, where the difference between the privileged and the non-privileged prisoners dominated, together with the difference between the veteran prisoners and the newcomers. The concept – gray zone – is the result of this analysis.

The basic way to tell the difference among people is their relationship with the concentration camp system – i.e. the importance of the function they served and the power over the other prisoners that their function entailed. One thing is the group of “low-ranking functionaries... sweepers, kettle washers, night watchmen, bed smoothers... checkers of lice and scabies, messengers, interpreters, assistants’ assistants.” These people made up “a picturesque fauna.... In general, they were poor devils like ourselves, who worked full time like everyone else but who for an extra half-liter of soup were willing to carry out these and other ‘tertiary’ functions.” These “poor devils” were mostly restricted to satisfying the manic passion for order that ran through the guards, even inventing job slots, like those for “bed smoothers.” These kinds of jobs were “innocuous, sometimes useful” jobs that did not hurt the other prisoners.

There is something else – the group that occupied commanding positions, a sort of prisoner elite: the chiefs (so-called Kapos) “of the labor squads, the barracks chiefs, the clerks, all the way to the world... of the prisoners who performed diverse, at times most delicate duties in the camps’ administrative offices, the Political Section (actually a section of the Gestapo), the Labor Service, and the punishment cells.” These prisoner “functionaries” guaranteed the Lager’s ongoing administration. They were able to manipulate regulations and documents. So, for example, they could switch a prisoner from one work Kommando to another or have the guards treat a prisoner less harshly. The work-squad Kapos assured production for the Third Reich and guaranteed order in the camp. All of them – even the low-ranking ones – wielded power over the lives of the other prisoners to the degree that it was “in substance, unlimited.... They were free to commit the worst atrocities on their subjects as punishment for any transgressions, or even without any motive whatsoever: until the end of 1943 it was not unusual for a prisoner to be beaten to death by a Kapo without the latter having to fear any sanctions.” However, once a Kapo starts to serve his Nazi masters and strike out against his comrades, he gets trapped inside the power that he exercises. He is feared and hated by the other deportees and hence he cannot give up his privileges and take his place again

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6 DS, p. 44.
7 p. 45.
8 p. 46.
among the masses, even if he wants to. He would be isolated, rejected and, if possible, killed. As in terrorist organizations, there is no going back.

Levi was interested in the motives that pushed prisoners towards the gray zone. The first motive, above all, was hunger, sometimes mixed with “terror, ideological seduction,” and clear-headed calculation aimed at getting around orders. There was also the “myopic desire for any power whatsoever, even though ridiculously circumcised in space and time… Sadists...[and] the frustrated [sought power]…. Finally, power was sought by the many among the oppressed who had been contaminated by their oppressors and had unconsciously strove to identify with them.”

Levi dissuades us from getting involved in the controversy over the “exchange of roles between oppressor and victim.” It is true that the network of human relationship in the Lager could not be broken down into the two blocks of victims and persecutors. It is true that the space between the two was not empty. “It never is.” However, this is no reason to hold that the role of oppressor and victim are interchangeable. “True and invented, disturbing and banal, acute and stupid things have been said; it is not virgin terrain; on the contrary it is a badly plowed field, trampled and torn up…. I am not an expert on the unconscious and the mind’s depths, but I do know that few people are experts in this sphere…. I do not know and it does not much interest me to know whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer. I know that the murderers existed, not only in Germany, and still exist, retired or on active duty, and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affection or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is a precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth.”

Here Levi interweaves icy irony and fiery protest in a way that bars us from falsely posing this issue in present-day terms. Thus he bids us to proceed “with a lighter hand and with a less turbid spirit,” something different from the approach taken, for example, in several films. Basically, he assumes the uniqueness of the Lager. He sticks to real experiences and not to false analogies. This gives what Levi (and not only Levi) is saying its universal scope.

The prominent ones

The term the prominent ones was used in Lager jargon to refer generically to all the prisoners who were members of the concentration camp hierarchy. However, it was also used more selectively to indicate those among them who enjoyed a condition or treatment “of respect” and hence broke off from the masses and were distinguished from them. These were the “great functionaries” who were embedded in crucial points within the camp organization, who made themselves indispensable for their potential and their abilities, and who “had access

9 pp. 43, 47-48.
10 p. 40.
11 pp. 48-49.
12 p. 40.
to the most secret information.” Some of these were common criminals, and some were political prisoners who “were also members of secret defense organizations.” Sometimes they managed to obtain some kinds of improvements for all the prisoners. Sometimes they became the historians of their camps, like Hermann Langbein for Auschwitz, Eugen Kogon for Buchenwald, and Hans Marsalek for Mauthausen.

Even though Levi places these prisoners among the privileged ones in the gray zone, he points out: “the power they wielded thanks to their positions was counterbalanced by the extreme risk they ran, inasmuch as they were both ‘resistors’ and repositories of secrets. The functionaries described were not at all, or were apparently, collaborators, but on the contrary camouflaged opponents.” Levi’s argument is brief, almost terse, but overlooks two critical points.

The first point that Levi overlooks is the relationship between privilege and self-awareness, a point that Bettelheim judges harshly: “The prisoner elite... were rarely without a sense of guilt over the advantages they enjoyed.... But... the most this usually came to was a greater need to justify themselves. This they did as members of ruling classes for centuries have done – by pointing out their greater value to society because of their power to influence, their education, their cultural refinement.” Eugen Kogon, writes Bettelheim, “took pride that in the stillness of the night he enjoyed reading Plato or Galsworthy, while in the adjacent room the air reeked of common prisoners, while they snored unpleasantly. He seemed unable to realize that only his privileged position... gave him the leisure to enjoy culture, an enjoyment he then used to justify his privileged position. He was able to read at night because he was neither shivering, nor stupid with exhaustion, nor starved.” Yet, he never managed to admit it. “No man who is basically decent and sensitive can do otherwise,” he adds. In the end, Kogon’s analysis helps explain why the “common” prisoners looked on “elite” ones with resentment. This resentment – it should be understood clearly – is a far cry from the Nazis’ grudge against intellectuals.

The second point that Levi overlooks is the power of the clandestine political organizations, which often was accompanied by paternalism, authoritarianism, and distrust towards the other deportees. However, there is

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13 p. 45.
14 p. 45-46.
15 Bruno Bettelheim, “Behaviour in Extreme Situations: Defences,” Ch. 5 in The Informed Heart: The Human Condition in Mass Society (London: Paladin, 1970; 1960), pp. 169-70. Bettelheim has no preconceived hostility towards Kogon. He reminds us that Kogon was able to testify at Nuremberg against the Nazi doctors only because he had agreed to take part in the experiments on human beings. In Kogon’s L’Etat SS. Le système des camps de concentration allemands (Paris: Seuil, 1993; 1947) [The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006); originally Der SS-Staat (München: Heyne, 2005; 1946)], reprinted many times, Kogon goes so far as to write “psychological complications of importance existed only in those who were of a higher value as individuals, groups, or classes.” According to Kogon, Bettelheim notes, “The educated classes ... were, after all, not prepared for life in the concentration camps [L’Etat SS, p. 302 ff.]. The inference seems to be that ordinary prisoners were suited to life in the camps, or did not suffer any psychological complications.”
16 Claire Andrieu, “Réflexions sur la Résistance à travers l’exemple des Françaises à Ravensbrück,” Histoire@Politique 2/2008 (n. 05) [Reflections on the resistance through the example of the French at Ravensbrück, http://www.histoire-politique.fr]. According to Kogon, the organization allowed the prisoners to raise an elastic wall against the SS “which could not have been maintained unless the camp was solidly organized by the prisoners themselves and strictly conducted. This was the only way to master and even to protect the elements that remained outside of the organization, who ignored or lacked discipline.” In fact, Kogon, who came from a social-Christian party, ended up approving of the methods of the communists, “who supplied the best
something more that has tragic implications. Many of the prominent ones, the communists above all, took along their ideological baggage of that time. This consisted in the absolute primacy of the collective (i.e. the party) over individuals as well as the imperative for self-preservation that went so far as to lead them to “sacrifice” whoever was not a party member.

In a 1983 interview, Levi took up this question. First, he mentioned a “Kapo... who beat up prisoners... and... a few days later he disappeared.” He continues: “there was indeed a network of Resistance and of preparation for Resistance which on occasion had a power of life and death. That is, they were able at times to get their hands on the personal files of the camp and to erase or add a name. So the *Kapo* could well have been inserted in place of a ‘selected’ prisoner, there was a way of manipulating to some extent the lists of those who were destined for the gas chambers. I asked the man who explained all this to me whether that meant that I, as a non-communist, could have ended up in the gas chambers to save the life of a communist? And he replied, yes, of course.... It’s hard to comment on such things. I think that in many ways they were justified in that only they had the capacity to sustain it, only the PC, the German communist party as it was then, and indeed all the monolithic communist parties as they were then, had the strength to organize in this way. And I think we have to accept this fact, that any old individual might have been condemned to death to save one of their own. I no longer think of it as so monstrous as all that.”

When Levi said “no longer,” he hinted that he first thought of it as monstrous. In the end, *The Drowned and the Saved* does not clarify Levi’s direction of thinking or his position. It only hands us down enormous open questions like these.

*An jury of peers*

Even though the term *gray zone* is not shared by all, it has entered fields of research worldwide in philosophy, feminism, law, history, theology, and popular culture. It soon became an unavoidable term of reference that many authors evoked, including Wiesel, Todorov, Agamben, Card, Finkelkraut, Levi Della Torre, Cavaglion, Pavone, and Lawrence Langer. There are too many to name. At its core there are several vital issues for our times and for all times, vital because they involve narratives of pain and mass death. There are the questions of who has the right to tell these stories, of whether moral judgments can be imposed on the behavior of the victims, and of whether
we can use the words of the Lager to describe other sets of circumstances. These are questions so complex that they never can be formulated adequately, answered innocently or answered at all.

The first question is whether the word of the saved is capable of representing the universe of imprisonment. This was a question that tormented Levi the most during those years. For him, as for Wiesel, the true, complete witnesses are the drowned, the so-called **Muselmann**, the only ones who got to know the lowest point. “The destruction brought to an end, the job completed, was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death. Even if they had paper and pen, the drowned would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body.” The testifying of the drowned is their not being able to testify. The saved ones do this “in their stead, by proxy.”

However, even after having cleared up this aspect, there is still another open, general question: is it possible to put together an adequate narration of the Lager? According to Alberto Cavaglion, there is a discontinuity between “The Gray Zone,” and (more generally) **The Drowned and the Saved**, on the one hand, and **If This is a Man**, on the other. In the earlier work, he argues, Levi had waged hand-to-hand combat with language, betting on his ability to get his experience across. By the time of the later work, he had lost this kind of confidence.

Yet this may not be altogether true, I believe, in that **The Drowned and the Saved** insists on commitment and builds an ethics and a kind of grammar of witnessing. In the Italy of the 1950-80s, a period when the historians’ interests about deportation was very scarce, the survivors acted as their substitutes. This is part of the reason why Levi has written his reflections on memory. He describes how memory can drift around and how risky it is to depend on it, how with the passing of time memory can get foggy, how one’s own experiences can blend in with the stories of others, and how language can be impoverished when it is exposed to the interference of the rhetorical tropes of celebration. Levi invites us to distinguish between what has been experienced and the hearsay heard during the deportation and in the years that followed. He insists that memory be subjected to the delicate and apparently pitiless filtering that the corroboration of the truth imposes, even in a restricted manner. He puts himself and his own very scrupulous memory into play, as he creates a language able to express “something that consists not only in events but in a range of instruments,” in the words of Bidussa. Thus it can be said, I believe, that even in the opinion of the Levi of **The Drowned and the Saved**, a partial discourse is better than no discourse at all – as long as the apparent contradictions in it are recognized.

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19 I cannot help but recall the tough (but affectionate) criticism made by Bruno Vasari, a friend of Levi’s and vice-president of the **Associazione nazionale ex deportati**. Vasari can claim the authority of a witness and he does this in various texts. See “La prevalenza della ragione sul sentimento nella testimonianza di Primo Levi,” in Enrico Mattioda (ed.), **Al di qua del bene e del male. La visione del mondo di Primo Levi** (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2000).

20 DS, p. 84.


This takes us back to the question of unsayable-ness, one so hard to resolve and complex that it does not even demand to be answered. As Agamben puts it, “On the one hand, what happened in the camps appears to the survivors as the only true thing and, as such, absolutely unforgettable; on the other hand, this truth is to the same degree unimaginable, that is, irreducible to the real elements that constitute it. Facts so real that, by comparison, nothing is truer; a reality that necessarily exceeds its factual elements.” This is what the deportees meant when they explained that although what they had could be called hunger, their kind of hunger was another thing. Hunger is a real event. The truth of the hunger in the Lager goes without a name. Lyotard had already compared the Shoah to an earthquake so powerful that it not only destroyed people and things but also the very instruments for measuring its intensity. Nevertheless, this does not justify those who have made no effort to imagine it. Perhaps, instead of talking about the unsayable, we should talk about what we cannot listen to or what we cannot look at, something that goes beyond what we are able to or want to know.

Furthermore, according to Agamben, the term unsayable-ness is deceptive in the same way as the term holocaust is. Both expressions give the extermination a mystical/sacral aura that is totally irrelevant. Both words ask us to lower our gazes, as if to legitimize anyone who looks the other way. We must, therefore, keep our gazes fixed “even at the risk of discovering that what evil knows about itself is something that we too can easily find inside of ourselves.” The Lager very well incarnated an exceptional state at its peak. It was the place where morals were turned upside down and where it was not decent to be decent. Yet, despite all this, it still is part of human experience.

In as much as it is a human experience, however, how can the kinds of behavior of the prisoners escape moral judgment? It is here that the concept of the gray zone expresses the most of its potential for complicating our analysis and is subject the most to equivocation. For Agamben, it is the symbol of the area where “victims become executioners and executioners become victims [and where] the oppressed becomes oppressor and the executioner in turn appears as a victim [because everything is immersed in] something like a new ethical element.... a zone of irresponsibility and ‘impotentia judicandi.’” (This “irresponsibility” is to be understood in the

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26 “Things that cannot be imagined, spoken about or passed down present no obstacles for the passing down of memory. On the contrary, they are memory’s crucial conduits,” writes Jean-Michel Chaumont. According to him, exactly what cannot be broken down gives us the chance to create a genuine community of shared experience made up of the victims and those who are listening to them from the outside, as it were. This is evidently a limited community but it is a fundamental one. This community is the connecting line that does not guarantee the passing down of the experience in itself, but rather the full awareness – the logic of the heart – of this: “the Nazi crimes and genocide constitute a fracture in our history, something which we are forced to locate ourselves in reference to, something that diverts the course of history, casting it in another light altogether.” Jean-Michel Chaumont, “L’inimaginable, l’indicible et l’intransmissible au service de la transmission,” paper presented at the international conference, Histoire et mémoire des crimes et génocides nazis, Brussels, November 23-27, 1992.
27 Giorgio Agamben, Remnants, p. 33 [Quel... Auschwitz, pp. 30, 55].
28 Giorgio Agamben, Remnants, pp. 17, 21 [Quel... Auschwitz pp. 15, 19 ff.].
legal sense as the “inability/ineligibility to judge.”) However, it is not quite clear how Agamben comes to this conclusion, as Cavaglion and Stefano Levi Della Torre point out.

Although Levi rejects the symbolic construction of an exchange of roles, he does not say that we are unable to judge. Instead, he limits jurisdiction only to those who had experienced the endless time of the Lager. These are the ones who had been haunted by the worst of dreams: they are among friends or family and find themselves, as Levi described himself, “alone in the center of a grey and turbid nothing, and now I know what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it: I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief deception of the senses, a dream” [If This is a Man. The Truce (London: Abacus, 1998), p. 379].

Levi asks for something simple – a jury of peers. Historically, the parity of judgers and the judged had to do with their rank. In relation to the Lager, this parity is measured according to the affinity of experience. It allows us to avoid any sentimentalism that would forgive everything. We likewise avoid any abstract morality that could claim to rate the relative levels of solidarity and dignity of the prisoners.

It is as a member of that jury of peers that Levi puts the concept of gray zone together with another issue – the relationship between privilege and survival. (This was not a new issue but had never before been faced in such a radical way.) According to Levi, “Privileged prisoners were a minority within the Lager population; nevertheless they represent a potent majority among survivors.” According to Levi, the saved owed their lives most of all to chance and to personal capacity. However, they also owed them to any form, even if minimal, of privilege. In a world where “death by hunger or by diseases induced by hunger was the prisoner’s normal destiny,” the only hope lay in “additional food. Obtaining that extra nourishment required a privilege – large or small, granted or conquered, astute or violent, licit or illicit – whatever it took to lift oneself above the norm.” In his other writings Levi had distinguished between the most vulnerable and the most resistant. Here he writes that the ones to survive were not the best.

This line of argument left some ex-deportees abashed and saddened. Some of them rebutted Levi with an argument that many had taken before. It was expressed in an exemplary way by Bettelheim. He maintained that there was an ingrained sense of randomness in the fate of the prisoners as well as a strategic irrelevance of whatever any of them could do or avoid doing to save themselves.

However, this was the same judgment as Levi made. Levi anchors it to a basic truth: if fortune is capricious, privilege is fleeting. In a world where there is no “why or because” it can happen that someone protected (or his/her protector) falls into disgrace, that the “good” job position that has been achieved is cancelled, that the hierarchy of the camp gets revamped with the arrival of new and more hardened groups. It can happen that a

30 DS, p. 40.
31 DS, p. 41.
person sees or hears something forbidden and ends up among those chosen for decimation. Or, simply, a person
could get sick and die. Privilege without good luck is not enough. Good luck alone is sometimes enough.

So, where does the adverse reaction of many of the ex-deportees come from? For many of them, it comes from
that statement of Levi’s: “The ‘saved’ of the Lager were not the best” (p. 82). For many others, it comes from the
sensation of being placed inside a zone of ambiguity just because they had saved their lives. The reference to Cain,
I believe, is decisive: “It is no more than a supposition, indeed it is a shadow of a suspicion: that each man is his
brother’s Cain, that each one of us (but this time I say ‘us’ in a much vaster, indeed, universal sense) has usurped
his neighbor’s place and lived in his stead. It is a supposition, but it gnaws at us; it has nestled deeply like a
woodworm; although unseen from the outside, it gnaws and rasps.”

Even though Levi passes from the perspective of the camp to the human condition in general, Cain remains the
symbol of the fratricidal hate that the Nazis were pushing the prisoners towards, sometimes succeeding. This
remains as the fulcrum of an interpretation of the imprisonment. Cain’s Lager is the place of everybody against
everybody, where companionship turns fatally into collusion, where friendly groups turn into gangs committed to
getting back at each other, and where there is no relationship possible except one inside of ethnic and national
groups. This type of vision clashes with the work done by some of the ex-deportees to exalt the aspects of
solidarity and resistance. This was their way of certifying that the Nazi project of total control of behaviors had
failed. This is a courageous and perhaps too generous attempt to educate as well as a controversial evaluation.
The Third Reich had lost the war, but it had done this in time to destroy millions of lives and most of Yiddish
culture.

The Lager was not always Cain’s Lager for several authors and for Levi in several of his writings. According to
Todorov, the prisoners forced themselves to preserve the outlines of a “moral” social contract even in the
harshness of competing for their lives. Somehow they realized that they needed this contract so as not to destroy
any minimal levels of coexistence. There was a certain book of etiquette in the Lager that Levi talked about in an
interview: “Then there was a system of rules which was not directly to do with survival but rather with good or
bad manners.” An example of this is a certain “dress code... it was important to have clothes, a hat, and shoes that
were ‘decent’—in inverted commas, of course.... In exactly the same way, it was considered maladroit, a sort of
gaffe, to talk about the crematorium or the gas chambers, in my camp at least.” This “system” was the prisoners’
form of taking care of each other that did not exclude violence at all, nor did it exclude certain kinds of gratuitous
aggressiveness, such as the initiation rituals that were in some cases very dangerous for the newly arrived
prisoners. These were conducted, as Levi explains, “with the cruelty reminiscent of schools or the barracks” The
Lager was also a great concentration of males (or of mostly males), but there are few other writers who mention
this aspect.

33 DS, pp. 81-82. The topic of Cain is amply commented upon by Tzvetan Todorov, Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien (Paris:
34 Tzvetan Todorov, Mémoire.
35 See above – the interview by Anna Bravo and Federico Cereja, pp. 219, 222, 225.
From concept to metaphor

By now we have long been hearing the word Lager used in Italian to refer to a psychiatric hospital, a prison, an old-age home or a home for the disabled. The term has entered everyday language not so much to assimilate Lagers and totalitarian institutions as to add some force to the denunciation of inhuman conditions. One thing is to use the term to address the Lagers. It is another thing entirely to use these specific categories in the studies of Lagers in order to analyze situations that are different. What can the way in which the gray zone is approached in The Drowned and the Saved tell us?

In the first place, Levi demonstrates that compare does not mean to make an accounting of the similarities and differences between two phenomena. To compare means to dismantle the concepts applied to the first phenomenon into their basic components. This serves to help us distinguish similarities and differences. It then becomes evident that there are those that throw new light on the second phenomenon and those that falsify both. In “The Gray Zone,” Levi writes, “the Lager (even in its Soviet version) can be considered an excellent ‘laboratory’” (p. 42). Levi considers the Gulag one of the rare areas that can be admitted in a comparison between Nazism and Communism. He devotes few words to this comparison. However, they are set into an analysis of the Lager that is so minute and detailed that they can give any of the readers a chance to set up their own research.

In the second place, Levi implicitly warns us about the heavy ideological baggage that weighs upon this comparison, something that occurs outside of Italy too. It is not just for aesthetic reasons that Levi detested these oracular and emphatic tones of discourse. He therefore entrusted his most articulate treatment of this issue to the appendix of the Italian school edition of If This is a Man (1973). At that time, the discussion over this issue was taking place in the canonical cultural venues – books, journals, and newspapers. These, by their very nature, lead us to the process of argument and rebuttal, radicalization, and warnings. It is true that proceeding by analogy must stop in the face of racist genocide and gas chambers, as many have said. 36 Yet, this does render comparisons in other areas meaningless.

In the Italy of the 1980s, though, any comparison at all seemed out of order to most of the scholars because, so they said, it ran the risk of making the extermination conditional and, more than that, because it assumed that there were two regimes cohabiting within the category of totalitarianism. In the 1980s this assumption was considered tool of Cold War propaganda.

36 According to Kaminski, the author of the first comprehensive study on twentieth-century concentration camps, the Lagers meant for immediate extermination – Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka – were not even Lagers, but factories producing cadavers that resist any comparison with other camps of the same type or with any of any other regime. The same is true for the extermination function at Auschwitz, where the deportees were subjected to a selection on their arrival and those judged unable to work were immediately killed. Andrzej J. Kaminski, I campi di concentramento dal 1896 a oggi: storia, funzioni, tipologia (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1997) [original: Konzentrationslager 1896 bis heute: Eine Analyse (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1982)].
It is a fact that even many non-communists recognized the prerogative of good intentions. Even though they all could see the results of communism clearly, they still insisted on the progressive and positive nature of its original aspiration. In effect, they followed the so-called *intentionalist paradigm*, which calls people to judge actions not by their results but by their guiding principles. There were black holes in awareness and distortions that abetted these and other instances of blindness and took in practically every faction of the old left and new as well as every one of their symbolic fathers. This was how strong the need was to preserve some hope that communism could be renovated.

This rift is crucial for the history of ideas in the twentieth century but is only a fragment in the affairs of Levi. Levi may have been one of these symbolic fathers, but he was one against his will and was situated apart. Yet he was not so apart, I think, that he was cut off from the various drifts in the debate with its burden of mutual excommunications, and repetitiveness. How many times was a Nazi atrocity rebutted with a Communist atrocity and vice versa? What would Levi have thought in the face of certain tones of ultimatum in the so-called *Historikerstreit*, the historians’ paper feud initiated in 1986 over the character of the unique event of the genocide? Or, in the case of some valiant defenders of the Lager who showed that they hardly knew it or knew it badly?

This was an environment where Levi could not feel at home. He stood in another theater of action, in another time set— that of the gradual building of the memory of the genocide. It is a memory exposed to a double threat. If we affirm that the extermination is unique or cannot be repeated, we may weaken its function as a universal warning. If we abandon the thesis of uniqueness, we run the risk that the phenomenon of the Lager will sink into the maelstrom of twentieth-century crimes. Levi knew that he was considered the prime person who was entitled to fight against results like these. He knew that his authority originated from his direct experience of the Lager and from the decades-long reflections he dedicated to it. For this reason he chose to narrative exclusively what he had

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37 This controversy began in 1986 with a piece by Ernst Nolte, a historian of Fascism, who wondered whether the reluctance of German society to face such a frightening past was somehow legitimate. He wondered whether the concentration on the Shoah distracted people from other events of the Nazi period and from “the genocide committed yesterday in Vietnam and today in Afghanistan.” The next step had to do with the genesis of the Shoah. Hitler was obsessed with the idea that the October Revolution was the product of international Judaism. Thus he acted with the conviction that he was the target of a project of annihilation conducted by the USSR. The Bolsheviks’ “extermination of classes” and the Gulag are therefore “the logical and factual precedent” and the model for the Lager. The Shoah can only be distinguished from this by the “technique” of the gas chambers. In the opinion of other writers, the similarities and differences between Nazism and Stalinism cannot allow us to forget their differences. One difference consists in the dimensions of the extermination (European in Nazism, only in the USSR in Stalinism). Another difference consists in the organizational set ups. In German there was a bureaucratized and industrialized system. In the USSR, there was “a brutal mix of civil-war-type excesses, mass ‘liquidations,’ slavery, and exploitation.” More in general, the comparison was held to be legitimate exclusively inside of similar contexts rather than in reference to culturally distant contexts like the Cambodia of Pol Pot, for example. This controversy is presented and commented upon in Gian Enrico Rusconi (ed.), *Germania: un passato che non passa* (Torino: Einaudi, 1987).

38 Annette Wieviorka, in *Déportation et génocide: entre la mémoire et l’oubli* (Paris: Plon, 1992); the chapters entitled “*Le ministère Frenay et les déportés*” and “*Les déportés juifs*” finely reconstruct the steps and the motivations for the deportation. For the awareness of extermination among the intellectuals, see Enzo Traverso, *Auschwitz e gli intelletuali. La Shoah nella cultura del dopoguerra* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2004), where there is an analysis of the positions of masters such as Hannah Arendt, Günther Anders, Levi, Sartre, Celan, and Améry.
experienced himself – a promise of truthfulness and an application, as well, of the principle “to each his own.” “His own” is the Lager, not the Gulag, and not the comparison between the two, which he leaves, with a heavy heart, to specialists. *The Drowned and the Saved* did not aim to be a history of twentieth-century concentration-camp systems.

Today the state of research has changed greatly as well as the climate. Comparisons among Nazism, Communism and other totalitarian systems are encouraged and practiced. However, we can thank this greater freedom of action for helping us discover that there is much more to explore within the Nazi concentration-camp world. As for the gray zone, there is much that still remains to be investigated. For example, there is the question whether the gray zones have the same characteristics and take on the same shape in all the Lagers and for every category of prisoner. One could begin with the difference between women and men, which many point out in a moving and summary way, Levi among them.

In the women’s camp at Ravensbrück the *Kapos* were not less ferocious than those at Buchenwald or Mauthausen. The struggle among the women prisoners could have been very violent, but there was no equivalent for the male “initiation.” Also, the attitude among the French women communists towards their political organization cannot be compared to that of the men. This was perhaps because the women did not play roles as prominent in the party. They were militants but not leaders. Or, perhaps their scale of priorities was more flexible, more open to case-by-case evaluation. What is certain is that their experiences were different and that this difference supports that idea that there were many kinds of situations in different camps and suggests that we should ask some more questions in the history of gender.

For decades the “difference” in the women prisoners from the men was identified in their maternity, their fecundity, the sexual threats of the guards, the family and family-like relationships made in the Lager, and the women’s relationship with their bodies. Important analyses have been made on these topics. Little has been written on the gray zone, however. So, in this perspective, it would be worth reading the precious memoirs and essays written by women, often very finely written, which have been published over the last several years.

I will limit myself to one observation. If we can speak of a gray zone in reference to women too, it is because there was, in fact, a group of prisoners who became part of the inner hierarchy of the camps, fulfilled some functions, and experienced the contradictions that derived from this situation. This is all the more reason, if we look around at external reality, that we must ask what traits can be associated with the gray zone, at least partially; and if these traits are enough to support the analogy.

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39 Claire Andrieu, *Réflexions*.

Anna Bravo – On the “Gray Zone”- 12
A good example is the work that Claudia Card did on the wives of slave-owners. Even though they were oppressed by the power of marriage, these women occupied positions that enabled them to oppress others in turn. These were more vulnerable people, such as the black people who were working in their houses. The same thing goes for the mothers, sisters, and wives of members of criminal organizations. On the one hand, they are the victims of the primacy of males. On the other hand, they are their accomplices. Card names these situations the gray area. (She feels that the term zone would be too much a reference to institutions set off from the world.) However, even beyond this distinction, Card’s borrowing of the term is a respectful one, one that is useful for focusing on the co-existence of responsibility and irresponsibility as well as on the difference between not having any power at all and having some power, even though it is limited.

It has not always been like that. It is true that many profound observations on the human condition have come out of studies on the camps, as if it were necessary to have an extreme in order to highlight elements that normally tend to be faded. However, it is equally true that the Lager is not an example of the outer limits of everyday oppression, that it is not the metaphor for modernity, just as totalitarianism is not the secret truth of democracy.

Levi writes that we have to get to know the despicable or pathetic figures of the gray zone “if we want to know how to defend our souls when a similar test should once more loom before us, or even if we only want to understand what takes place in a big industrial factory.” However, he also said that he did not understand the people who stubbornly kept on calling the Fiat factory a Lager and, as Langer reminds us, he doubted that the concept could be stretched so far. He would have rejected “any effort to identify such camp behavior with the collaboration of free men and women in the Vichy or Quisling regimes in France and Norway.” The judgment changes according to whether the collaboration takes place inside or outside of the barbed wire fences! Levi would have been astonished in the face of the use of the term gray zone to define a space with fluid borders that exists between the practices aimed at making the enemy harmless and those enacted in order to exterminate them.

In response to this, people could assert that, by definition, the method of analogy should be applied to different historical circumstances. Although this is true, we should not forget Levi’s first teaching: concepts are to be broken apart and “weighed.” If they are not, analogy could potentially latch on to ambiguity and fuzziness of borders – apparently a more manageable topic – and let go of issues such as power relationships, roles, privileges and levels of pressure that were inflicted. The result is that the gray zone – once a topic – gets turned into a metaphor.

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42 DS, p. 40.
44 Frédéric Rousseau, “Aux marges de la guerre: le nettoyage des tranchées. Exploration d’une zone grise durant la Grande guerre,” in Philippe Mesnard and Yannis Thanassekos, *La zone grise entre accomodation et collaboration*, p. 235. This interesting essay discusses the “cleansing of the trenches” – i.e. operations for the clearing out and the securing of territory that was won.

**Anna Bravo – On the “Gray Zone”**
Against idealizations

The years when Levi was presumably elaborating the topic of the gray zone were years when the memory of the deportation shifted from an urgency to bear witness to a need to rethink and to categorize. Even though the awareness of the Lager had become more widespread, there were still some ambiguities that persisted. In addition, a new type of revisionism was taking its place besides the old. In effect, sheer denial was being replaced by an attempt to relativize the extermination to the point of making it a variant in the process of Europe’s turning barbarian in the first half of the twentieth century. (It was a variant that was egregious but was only one among the many.)

There is something even more undermining – post-modern subjectivism. This line of thought uses the ever more problematic relationship between reality and its representations as a means of denying that documents or documentation have any autonomy. They are reduced to simple inert materials that can be used to support any kind of thesis at all indifferently. The result is that what is true and what is false lose their meanings while they are being transformed into interpretations that cannot be compared or contrasted, as if reality did not exist. Thus post-modern thought is able to express moral rejection in the face of theses like Faurisson’s, but it hesitates to define them for what they are, lies.

This is not the only threat. Ambiguities and distortions have landed on very delicate soil – the social image of the survivor – and this has not necessarily happened out of bad faith. I will mention the two cases that seem directly or indirectly connected to the gray zone.

The first is the ease with which people go on about the guilt feelings of the survivors. This is a real phenomenon, but one that needs to be analyzed more accurately. One thing is the survivors’ sadness when remembering their lost companions. This consists in the trauma of being asked by their companions’ loved ones – “Why yes for you and no for him?” – or in their remorse for something that was done or was not done. There is another thing, though. This is the sense of universal, cosmic guilt, which is the price of being left alive and is not exclusive to the ex-deportees. This kind of guilt is also found among the survivors of Hiroshima and natural disasters – events that take place so quickly that there is no other explanation besides chance. Yet, this speed did not wipe out their thoughts of having been saved “in the place of” someone else or of many others. There is

45 The Frenchman Robert Faurisson is one of the first and also one of the most dogged in denying the extermination of the Jews and the existence of the gas chambers, defining the Shoah an invention of American propaganda in support of the state of Israel. His notoriety as the most prominent of the negationists is also due to the fact that the publication of his short work, Mémoire en défense contre ceux qui m’accusent de falsifier l’histoire. La question des chambres à gaz (Paris: La Vieille Taupe, 1980) was welcomed in the name of freedom of expression by the famous American linguist Noam Chomsky, someone coming from the extreme left, who wrote an introduction of this work.

another thing – the anguish blended in with the satisfaction of being alive, which can be felt even when death comes under normal circumstances.

Levi wrote, "The condition of the offended does not exclude culpability." In all frankness, he names the torment that originates in a person’s own suspicion that he or she is responsible in some way or shape. “You are like us, you proud people: dirtied with your own blood, as we are. You too, like us and like Cain, have killed the brother.” These are the words that Levi has the SS say to the men of the Sonderkommando. He (as well as others) described a state of mind where the awareness of being the “unjust” beneficiary of chance clashes with the awareness of being innocent. Other survivors talked about a sense of personal shame for what they saw and suffered as well as for having tried to preserve their dignity in the face of those that had lost it quickly. In addition, they felt a general shame for the pit into which the human race had sunk by creating the Lager.

It would be wise to profit from these observations and cultivate them prudently. While Levi was analyzing the responsibility of the deportees in the gray zone, he bid us to refrain from making amateurish raids into deportees’ psyches and then generalizing. He bid us to give up any unhealthy ambition to try to see what the deportees looked like inside. He was not always listened to. In fact, some people drew from Freud in order to make caricature-like mass psychoanalyses. There was even someone who came face to face with an ex-prisoner who said he had no sense of guilt. This person was careful to inform the survivor that he had a sense of guilt but had repressed it. The worst tendency was that of tracing every painful problem of the survivors back to the Lager, to the point of proclaiming that a suicide could not help but be its result. According to an ideology like this, ex-prisoners belong stably and exclusively within the perspectives of tragedy. This is something that makes them into evocative characters in a literary sense because they have been denied the right to normal unhappiness.

It is a good sign that we can run into these distortions more often in conversations than in written texts. This is a way of saying that there is some shame in giving these opinions definitive trappings, even though the annoyance that they provoke among the ex-deportees still remains. Nevertheless, there is an even worse distortion that weighs on the survivors, one that seems flattering but is really outrageous – the distortion of exceptionalism. The survivor is said (by Terrence Des Pres) to be the modern hero. Survivors can cross through evil and dive fully into boundless life, unfettered of any restraints or cultural mediation and under the urgency of the primordial imperatives of the body. People commonly believe that some people survived because they were exceptional and that they were exceptional because they survived. All this runs the risk of transforming survivors

48 DS, pp. 44, 55.
49 The topic of Cain is amply treated in Tzvetan Todorov, Memoria del male, tentazione del bene (Milano: Garzanti, 2001), pp. 213-23. [original: Mémoire du mal].
50 Giorgio Agamben, Remnants [Quel che resta di Auschwitz, p. 55].
51 There is yet another thing, as set forth by Elena Loewenthal: “The feeling of guilt for not having known Auschwitz, the incurable frustration and additional guilt feeling for not being able to understand or share that pain. To invent within the Shoah is not a taboo. On the contrary, it has become an intimate and terrible need.” Elena Loewenthal, “Se la memoria diventa ossessione,” Lo Stampa, January 26, 2010.
into witnesses under the duress of their own excellence. This and similar “monstrous” ideologies were received with harsh criticism, but this does not stop them from re-emerging periodically, so powerful is the conviction that suffering is a merit and survival is a prize.

Then there is the mystical variant of angelism. As Finkelkraut denounces, the survivor is summoned to testify for the Good – that is, for the presence of God in history, in such a way as to appear doubly saved – on the material or earthly plane and on the “celestial” or metaphysical plane as one who has benefitted from divine favor. Bettelheim traces out a symbolic dialogue between a woman who had escaped arrest and deportation and another who had paid for the help she had given Jewish families by being “imprisoned for years because she had helped Jews.” The woman who had escaped asks why exactly she had been saved: “When I put the question of ‘Why?’ to her, she [the imprisoned woman] answered, ‘So that you can prove for the rest of your life that it was worth you being saved.’” In contrast, Levi speaks of the “saved,” not the “chosen.” He had seen his “religious convictions, which were already pretty scarce,” weaken even more in the Lager. For him, such an obligation to demonstrate that he was “worth being saved” was an insult.

Besides, divine favor costs dearly. A friend of Levi’s who was a believer, Levi relates, told him that he had been saved so that he could write and by writing bear witness. This is something different than the duty to bear witness that was felt by many of the ex-deportees. This is, instead, a condemnation to justify one’s own existence by writing, a condemnation that does not foresee the “end of the sentence being served” but only its being repeated, as if by keeping quiet a survivor loses the right to live. By locating survivors (and himself) among the “worst,” Levi was perhaps trying to contrast these idealizations, including many of those that grew up around his persona. In Italy the witness for third parties became the Just One for third parties.

I remember the time of Levi’s death – the sadness and the sense of disorientation over the loss of a symbolic father (of a lay saint, as some said). This sadness was mixed in with a feeling of having been doubly abandoned – firstly, because of his end, as if saints do not have the right to die and, secondly, because of the way he died, as if his suicide cast a shadow over his life. It was commonly thought that Levi was the person who beat Auschwitz. This is an unhappy definition for a person who was so free from the vice of belligerence. Suicide broke this image. From here came the compulsion to “explain it,” to make some sense out of it, a compulsion in those who loved him that was understandable but violent. From here came the stubborn efforts, anything but innocent, that several would-be biographers made to root around in his life in the hunt for any minimal personal detail. Perhaps the whole chapter on the gray zone can be read as a warning against idealizations too, but this is not all.
Classifying people, classifying behaviors

There is a second key to reading the gray zone that seems useful to me. It is the tension that we can feel between the choice to judge behaviors and the choice to judge the identities of those practicing such behaviors. This is an issue that is decisive for history. Identity is something multiple and variable, a kaleidoscope of virtual identity cards in motion. People can recognize themselves as members of a family, ethnic group or community; as workers, followers of a religion, or political militants; as athletes, musicians, or painters; as people with good voices or people who can relate to others easily, talents that were able to contribute to being spared in the Lager. In any case, this way of speaking is something that is always valid and applies to everyone. For example, Vjosa Doerun is an activist in the non-violent resistance in Kosovo and the founder of a medical center for women and children who could not benefit from medical assistance from the Serbian federal government. She explains herself as well as possible: “My identity is that I am a woman, a Kosovar, a pediatrician, and the daughter of someone and everybody should be free to express herself like me.”

By now there are few historians that see identity as one whole piece. The better informed, especially women, try to move from one aspect to another, making efforts, for example, to avoid reducing an individual to his or her political affiliations. This is like what happened sixty years ago in the days of the liberation of Italy. The women partisans saw that the Fascist before them was a father of a family, an unfortunate person, or a harmless blusterer and tried to spare him.

Historians are not supposed to pass sentence, so they say; but historians’ narratives cannot ignore the issue of judgment. Thus they are always tempted (and sometimes forced) to draw on the concept of identity for its power to define. At other times passing judgment is an operation that takes historians off course because reasoning in terms of identity is the equivalent of classifying individuals. The categories of historical and social research are obviously narrower than those of real life. Research categories are so narrow that, in order to place people inside of them, they have to be cut into pieces and the pieces that do not fit have to be thrown out.

Classifying behaviors is something else. The German Oskar Schindler and the Italian Giorgio Perlasca are two of the great rescuers of Jews. Schindler was an opportunistic businessman without many scruples who joined the Nazi party. Perlasca was a Fascist (maybe ex-Fascist) who had never crossed over to anti-Fascism, an ex-volunteer in the Spanish Civil War on the side of Franco. Both loved women and high life.

The Israeli commission charged with selecting “the Just” waited years and years before citing them. They had been looking for rescuers who were exemplary as well as politically and socially “guaranteed.” They needed to give the images of Schindler and Perlasca an overhaul before granting them that certificate of respectability. The irony of fate is that such an overhaul purged them precisely of those traits that helped give them the force to act – recklessness; the ability to lie to Nazis, to bait and switch, and to bribe them; finally, the spirit of adventure, vitalism, and faithlessness towards ideologies. Judging their identities, they ended up “unpresentable.”

Convegno sulla ricezione dell’opera di Primo Levi nei paesi europei, Torino, October 2003; see www.ernestoferrero.it.
Considering their acts, they were welcomed with open arms.

Certainly, protagonists are not a tabula rasa and there is a link between behavior and identity, but it is link that cannot be taken for granted. The limited examples of Perlasca and Schindler give us our first way to look at things. Rather than fence individuals inside the borders of right and wrong, we should evaluate their behaviors in all their contradictions and unforeseeable features while their positive and negative features are intertwining and alternating. Our second way to look is to grasp that judgments about identity tell us little about the person judged but a lot about the people who are judging. In the case of the Yad Vashem commission, we discover that they were worried about the image they would be projecting to the world. This preoccupation with seeming “upright” is something unexpected in view of the sloth [in the sense of the refusal to take sides] that had been demonstrated by the majority of the so-called “upright” people.

Such a mechanism is something at work not only for the past and for history but also for today and for political analysis. In these years in Italy, instead of reporting the news that someone has won or lost, people often say that that someone is un perdente (o un vincente) – a loser or a winner. This is a meaningful shift. If we say s/he has won or lost, we evoke an episode, a piece of one’s life path. If we say loser or winner, we evoke a human type, even a species of human being, which cannot be modified and we reduce the world to a belligerent dichotomy – the strong/the weak, the wise/the reckless, or leader-of-the-pack/followers. A person who wins the first prize at a lottery is an unfair winner because he cannot be reflected in his loser. I do not know exactly if such a linguistic/symbolic convolution exists in languages other than Italian.

What can the gray zone tell us on these grounds? Levi is not a historian and is not obliged to settle the conflict between judgment about identity and judgment about behaviors. However, he writes: “Each individual is so complex that there is no point in trying to foresee his behavior... nor is it possible to foresee one’s own behavior.”

He also demonstrates that even in extreme situations an analysis of actions and practices is the best way to reach a credible approximation of reality. Even though various people as individuals or as groups appear in the gray zone, Levi describes the gray zone mostly in terms of functions, practices, and states of mind, weaknesses and/or resistance. This is true even in the case of Rumkowski, who was named president of the Lodz ghetto, Levi writes “And yet his figure was more complex than it may appear thus far.... His identification with the oppressor alternates, or goes hand in hand, with an identification with the oppressed.”

There are only a few cases, I believe, where a judgment concerning a person prevails. The first example is the case of Muhsfeld, “one of the SS men attached to the death installations,” who demonstrated a fleeting glimmer of pietas on only one occasion. Levi writes: “In The Brothers Karamazov, Grushenka tells the fable of the little onion. A vicious old woman dies and goes to hell, but her guardian angel, straining his memory, recalls that she once, only once, gave a beggar the gift of a little onion she had dug up from her garden. He holds the little onion out to her, and the old woman grasps it and is lifted out of the flames of hell. This fable has always struck me as revolting: what human monster did not throughout his life make the gift of a little onion, if not to others, to his children, his wife, his dog? That single, immediately erased instant of pity is certainly not enough to absolve

59 DS, p.60.
60 p. 64.
Muhsfeld. It is enough, however, to place him too, although at its extreme boundary, within the gray band.\textsuperscript{61} Levi does not place him among the saved, in any case. There is a dualism, according to Debski, in which “the selfish person of today can become the altruist of tomorrow, and vice-versa.”\textsuperscript{62} Nevertheless, this is not enough to convince Levi, who even is a master in presenting oscillations and reversals. Is Muhsfeld the real target here, or is the target the idea that an instant of compassion can compensate for an entire life of dirty doings, one rooted in Catholic tradition or in a kind of conciliatory humanism?

The second example comes from \textit{If This is a Man}. Levi calls Henri the “seducer” to judgment, a person for whom he felt “an almost physical repulsion.” The reason is that Henri was not only a dweller of the gray zone but that he created his own personal stretch of it, a surplus acquiescence. Henri had intuited that there was a need for a ray from the world outside that nestles inside of even the worst people. Thus he went about insuring these people something that may have been more useful than the good functioning of the productive machine. He offered them a simulacrum of “normal” feelings. Henri would go to meet the overseers with a smile that he so put together so well that it looked spontaneous. Thus, he put on a little stage play, as fictive as it was attractive. The Lager was no longer the Lager. For the SS guards and the high-level functionaries, the \textit{Kapo} was a servant. Henri was a “friend.”

Many years later Henri was to respond by putting himself back into the time that he spent in his history of imprisonment. He had suffered, risked death, and gotten to know the conditions of the non-privileged prisoners. He had seen his maneuvers fail. He had not always been “the seducer,” it was maintained.\textsuperscript{63}

It strikes us automatically to wonder whether Henri was basically, like Rumkowski, “a symbolic and compendiary figure,” whether we can apply to Henri what Levi writes about Rumkowski “we are all mirrored in Rumkowski, his ambiguity is ours, it is our second nature, we hybrids molded from clay and spirit.”\textsuperscript{64} Certainly he was a literary character, a resource that the narrative of these events cannot do without, whether the narrative is considered as testimony or it is interwoven with analytical writing. Nevertheless, he also seemed to be a concrete individual in \textit{If This is a Man}. If so, he seemed most believable as a shrewd prostitute who can convince clients that they are having love affairs. There is one basic difference. A prostitute sells his or her body. Henri sells his soul. From Levi’s point of view, selling one’s soul is worse than losing it like so many prisoners who did. The reason is that the word \textit{sell} alludes to a relationship, a range of choices, a pact. It is a point of view that falsifies the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor down to the roots and turns one of Levi’s most treasured words into a parody, \textit{friendship}.

\textsuperscript{61} pp. 57-58.
\textsuperscript{64} DS, pp. 68-69.
I do not know if *The Drowned and the Saved* was in harmony with the climate of Italy of those years, as Alberto Cavaglion thinks. This was a climate that tended towards half tones and towards self-absolution to the point of self-complacency. Eraldo Affinati thinks differently. For him there is no writer aside from Levi who had the courage "before the fall of the Berlin wall to reflect beyond ideological categories on the feelings of extreme fragility, present in all of us like harmful sirens capable of unhinging our defenses and leading us to the most terrible of abstentions – the abstention from judgment."\(^{65}\)

It is certain, however, that for some people the expression *gray zone* became a kind of “everybody-in-free” that freed them from the weight of the past and in no time turned into a short cut through ethics and politics. There were many people who could have reflected on Fascism’s power of corruption in their own lives, but they preferred to seek shelter in the unfair but providential image of vagueness. This was the first step towards an interpretation of the gray zone in ideological terms, as something the opposite of what it first meant. It was the first step towards its distortion. In fact, Levi’s gray zone originates by taking “the good” and “the bad” away from the two blocks, taking out some of them and moving them into a new territory. The gray zone, when interpreted in a banal way, does not disarrange these bordered zones at all but merely adds another one ready for all uses. This is not a small difference.

We ought to wonder why this appropriation of the term went to its extremes in Italy, specifically in the history of the Resistance. There is something that counts more than the issue of which book or article was written first, I believe. Instead, what counted for decades was a sort of gentleman’s agreement to overlook certain people’s connections to Fascism. What counted, further, were the limits imposed on what historians could discuss. What else did this (re-interpreted) gray zone promise, aside from “everybody-in-free”?

The term *gray zone* was adapted in Italian writings on the Resistance with amazing speed as a way of indicating the women and men who did not choose but kept up an attitude of equidistance between the two camps. For all appearances, talking of a gray zone opens the path towards non-Manichean research on the orientations of these people. In fact, it is often the equivalent to declaring that there is nothing to understand. Grayness, opacity, and passivity – the picture is already there. So, it may not seem so important that someone is given a break and someone else is treated unjustly. This concept here does not originate in historical analysis, but rather takes the place of analysis and makes it appear futile. This is the exact opposite of what Levi did. In times nearer to us, the gray zone became a new way of calling a kind of reality that is little studied or not studied at all. Yet, inside this area there were people who were very different from each other, including people who had taken sides but not in a way that could be seen within the perspective of politics. One example consists in the people

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\(^{65}\) Eraldo Affinati, “Responsabilità,” *Riga* (13), 1997, dedicated to Primo Levi as writer. See p. 432. See Marco Belpoliti’s editorial, where he defined Levi a witness but also a “man of science… a lover of words and linguistic plays on words, an innovator of vocabulary… a curious and passionate investigator of the marginal zones of our culture, but most of all a lover of the complexity and the hybridization among the various branches of knowledge,” pp. 6 ff.
who resisted without arms and acted outside of the circuits of political parties and inside of the walls around a family, a neighborhood, or a town.

The fact is that the community of historians and the intellectual establishment looked almost exclusively at the armed and politically militant aspects of this period. They were working under a pre-judgment similar to the one Calvino portrayed brilliantly in a line from a song he wrote Oltre il ponte [Beyond the bridge] – “tutto il male avevamo di fronte, tutto il bene avevamo nel cuore” [“everything evil was in front of us, everything good was in our hearts”].

The issue is not only the need for simplification that Levi described. The issue is that the chiaroscuros incorporated in every human experience were taken as attacks against the values of the Resistance. The writings of Pavone unleashed the angry reaction of many partisans. At that time, Crainz’s research on the violent acts committed after 25 April 1945 had not yet been published. In any case, the values of the Resistance were inevitably tempered by their roots among the people. In the end, the people were partial and unstable. Yet, they should be taken into consideration. To do this, the gray was kicked out of the Resistance and shuttled outside. Gray became the color of slothfulness, of non-commitment. It explained everything and it had nothing at all to do with the personal vicissitudes and the various political choices of the partisans. This was the way that the gray zone became another step in the “autobiography of the nation”, a step that can neither be made out nor put to the test of truth. It is here that Italy became different from France, which also had a very hard time putting together a more realistic anthropology of the people who resisted.

It is not as if there has not been some progress since then. The great majority of the population of those years had been compared to a sort of quagmire of opportunism. This part of the population began to be looked upon more sensitively beginning with the 1990s. From this decade on, there was much more emphasis focused on common suffering and on the fatigue expended just to survive.

Someone who actually did this in a wonderful book (Une tragédie française. Été 1944: scènes de guerre civile, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1994) is Tzvetan Todorov. Todorov presents us with the spasmodic comings and goings of the commanders of partisan, German, and Fascist groups and the mayor of a little French town as he strove to break a short circuit of reprisals and counter-reprisals yet failed desperately. Nothing at all would have been known about all this without the mayor’s diary, which Todorov had rediscovered. He presents topics that are central to Levi’s own line of argument: the relationship with power and one’s responsibility towards one’s fellows.
Meanwhile, the topic of ambiguity is not a category that bears any weight. If anything counts, it is fate. It is my impression that we in Italy have not gone forward like this for some time now.

Instead, the concept of the gray zone is spreading steadily as a common way of understanding. The gray zone had originated to help us understand the complexity of power relationships. By now, it has become a metaphor used to allude to “something hidden, impenetrable and uncertain,” a psychological- anthropological-sociological category that is good for interpreting any set of circumstances. These circumstances “include even the telephone eavesdropping used in a press conference by the majority stockholder of the country’s biggest company, whom government prosecutors alleged was guilty of illegal activities,” as Belpoliti noted. Evidently, we have agreed to put away binary oppositions only as long as we have a third chance at our disposal, one that is just as reassuring, one that does not bring power, responsibility, and freedom into question. The good stay good. The bad stay bad. The gray are added on. According to the ideologies of who is judging, the gray are joined either to the good or to the bad. Sometimes the gray are exalted as the expressions of wise moderation in the face of “extremism.” Sometimes they are stigmatized as historical dead weight. In these cases, the so-called gray zone presents us with a perfect example of idle words because these words exempt us from the fatigue of thinking during this phase of fearful impoverishment of ideas and of opposing instances of conformism.

A trait of these years, it seems to me as I paraphrase Agamben, is that it is not serious to be serious and that it is not useful to be useful. It is not useful to reject generalizations about Italy and the Italians. It is so comfortable to talk about a national character. We just have to be patient if this category is so volatile that it can be pulled in any direction. It is not useful to look for new terms to characterize deficient democracies and media-based despotisms. (Yet, for a minority of people, it is.) It comes to us so spontaneously to use “Fascism,” another idle word. It is not serious to criticize someone who uses the term subjectivity in a very idle way in order to justify anyone, including the so-called ragazzi di Salò [the young militants of the Italian Social Republic]. It is not convenient to denounce philosophers or newspaper columnists who copy entire sections from the works of colleagues. It is better to use less demanding words like “quotation.” Hasn’t post-modernism taught us that everything is quotation? Isn’t it better to avoid strong words like plagiarism? Even the drama of “third-party” witnesses is reduced to the search for people of any kind who can talk and who agree to give a touch of what they experienced to the re-telling of a crime or a catastrophe, even if they have little to say other than that they have not “seen anything.”

We are feasting on the gray zone, or better, on the caricature of what it has become in the eyes of many people.