

The sociology of crimes against humanity

The Ordinariness of Genocide



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The discipline of genocide studies is highly complex, touching on almost all aspects of social life. As such, it faces numerous barriers and demands an interdisciplinary approach

The very term “genocide” entered the lexicon relatively recently. It was introduced by Raphael Lemkin (1900-1959), a Polish lawyer of Jewish descent; he coined in 1944 from the rooted words *genos* (Greek for family, tribe, or race) and *-cide* (from Latin *caedere* for killing). The concept was introduced to international law after the end of WWII at the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (9 December 1948). The inconceivable scale of the Holocaust meant that genocide was seen as the ultimate evil; it was a common accusation thrown by both sides during the Cold War. Interestingly, despite having been adopted legally, the resolution remained dormant for decades, and even the greatest crimes tended to be trivialized in the name of geostrategic interests. This had a major impact on social sciences, which have always been extremely sensitive to political influences.

In order to understand what can lead to such an extreme crime and as such help us assess the risk of genocides occurring in the future, we need to distance ourselves from many preemptive judgments, which are widespread even at universities. Accusing others of perpetrating genocide and formulating defenses against

similar accusations are common discursive strategies aiming to recreate specific imagined communities such as nations. In order to be impartial, scholars must not be concerned with a positive imagine of their own nation; instead they must seek the truth, even if it hurts the collective memory of their compatriots. The Katyń massacre, when thousands of Polish army officers were executed by Soviet secret police during WWII, serves as an example of how sensitive this subject is. In Poland, anyone who does not regard it as a genocidal act (but as “merely” a war crime, for example) generally faces criticism not only from politicians and anonymous online commenters, but also from other scholars, whether they specialize in genocide studies or not.

Perhaps an even greater challenge lies in trying to free our perception of genocide as being “utterly inhuman,” an absolute evil, a rare exception in the course of humankind’s history. Naturally genocide is a crime which cannot be morally justified under any circumstances. However, treating it as something wholly abstract from ordinary social mechanisms is as ineffective as it is dangerous. This is what I would like to devote the rest of this paper to.

Genocide’s banal roots

That genocide should be explained as resulting from ordinary (rather than extraordinary) social processes becomes clear when, instead of limiting ourselves to a single example, we conduct a comparative analysis of all known instances of genocide. The first problem we are faced with is the extremely sensitive and emotive question of defining genocide. From the sociological perspective, the definition offered by the Convention is not terribly useful. Most scholars use slightly different descriptions, but they are largely in agreement that genocide is an extraordinary case of mass murder, distinguished by the fact that its very aim is an extermination of a given social group rather than winning a war, or seizing territory, wealth, or power. In these terms, the list of historical genocides is rather short. For example, I personally



Many types of ideological discourse, including nationalism and racism, shape certain categories of “us” vs. “them,” and as such may lead to genocide

think that we can distinguish three instances of a “total genocide” (targeting, in chronological order, the Armenians; the Jews and Roma; and the Tutsi and Twa peoples) and nine instances of “partial genocides.” Comparative studies of genocides require an application of historical sociology; additionally, many scholars regard the subject as reprehensible, since – according to critics – comparing different instances of mass violence on this scale leads to the trivialization of the most terrible instances of genocide and to equating the status of victims that is inexcusable. Let’s leave these objections aside for now, noting only that if someone claims that a given instance of genocide is unique, the burden of proof rests on their shoulders.

Macroscopic events such as genocides, wars and revolutions are not governed by distinct, specific rules. They are not separate entities, but rather they exist as a result of numerous social processes: mobilization of people and resources, logistics, managing collective action,

manipulating social concepts and myths, and so on. In order to gain a better insight, it’s worth recalling the analogy first presented by the social historian Charles Tilly. He compared a revolution to a traffic jam. There are no distinct rules governing the formation of inconvenient gridlocks – they are the result of highway codes that are in place, as well as local infrastructure, transport policies, individual strategies of drivers in a rush to get to work, driving culture, and so on. It’s only when we consider the entire system in place that we are able to explain how the traffic jam has come about, or – in our case – the set of circumstances that have led to a revolution or genocide.

The potential for violence is structurally present in international relations. People live as citizens of specific countries and members of nations and/or ethnicities. Attitudes promoted by formal institutions (such as schools or armies) combined with pressures originating from symbolic violence (such as concepts

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shaped by popular culture) serve to create national identities and socialize young people as “ordinary” citizens. By shaping the construct “us,” we automatically create the category of “others,” who are potential enemies. Young people are taught that it is their patriotic duty to “defend their homeland.” What does this mean in practice? Simply that they are willing to kill people as instructed by their superiors. It is no accident that the majority of genocides have been closely tied with wars. Many perpetrators of genocides perceived the extermination of other people – even when the latter have been utterly defenseless – as an act of protecting their own state and nation against an enemy. This applies not just to Wehrmacht officers, but also to soldiers of the Ottoman Empire in 1915 and 1916 (whose victims were Armenians), to Rwandan forces in 1994 (acting against the Tutsi and Twa), and to US soldiers between 1866 and 1890 (against the Native Americans).

It has been said that the perpetrators’ beliefs are irrelevant, and only “objective” historical facts matter. However, sociologists focus on social aspects of events; on how people define the situations in which they find themselves. A fundamental principle of sociology, formulated by William Thomas, states, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” This is one of the reasons why I believe that revenge plays an important role in mobilization for genocide, since the perpetrators believe that their actions are a retribution for past or current actions of the victims, which constituted a threat to the perpetrators. What independent observers or historians think is not important here. For example, scores of Hutu soldiers massacred their innocent Tutsi neighbors, blaming them for war and all manner of other past calamities.

This is why mobilization for genocide is so heavily driven by various discourses, many of which seem almost invisible on a day-to-day basis, since they contribute to shaping our sense of normality. In my analysis, such ideological discourse can be classified into seven distinct types: focusing on nationalism, *Realpolitik*, racism, medical and epidemiological topics, religious fundamentalism, conspiracy, and utility vs. parasitism. It is not necessary for all of these to develop at once – by forming various configurations and complex relationships, these discourses can

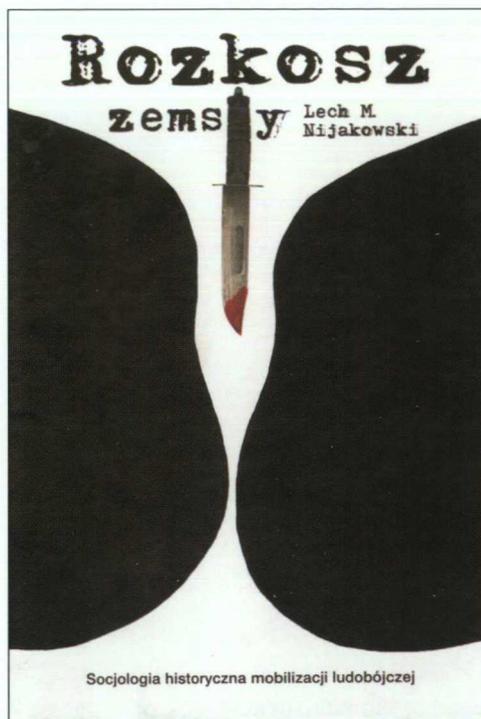
create a social order that is conducive to mobilization for genocide. It is not only extreme racist hate speech that drives people to commit violence. Discourses that get reiterated during peacetime (in particular focusing on nationalism and *Realpolitik*) can construct certain notions of enemies, facilitating actions of dogmatic politicians or formalizing social frustrations and discontent. They also facilitate the development of security and prosperity dilemmas, which are further drivers of mobilization for genocide.

Morality of genocide

The belief that genocides are extremist acts also extends to how their perpetrators are characterized. Most people tend to regard genocide perpetrators – the murderers who carry out massacres, and those who give the orders – as mentally-ill sadists. One example is the vast number and popularity of theories searching for the roots of Hitler’s psychopathology. The truth is, however, that there simply are not sufficient numbers of people who deviate so violently from the norm to be wholly responsible for such complex crimes. According to estimates, only approx. 5-10% of the perpetrators of Nazi genocides were affected by mental disorders. The people behind genocides are frequently perfectly “normal” in terms of personality and intelligence tests; in fact they tend to believe that they are striving towards a greater good, which gives their acts a moral aspect however distasteful we might find them. Harald Welzer noted, “The relationship between mass killing and morality is not contradictory, but rather the two are intertwined. Without morality mass killings would be impossible.”

While many ordinary people are involved in genocides, the participation of certain groups of experts is also essential, such as ideologues, engineers, lawyers, clerics, members of the uniformed services, and so on. Their tendency to become involved in mass violence derives not just from convictions widespread at the time (such as institutionalized racism), but also from their own specific professional trajectories. Individuals who play a key role in maintaining public order can become significant perpetrators of genocides, even without fundamentally changing the way they act. One example is the German Corps in German South-West Africa, who perpetrated the Herero and Namaqua genocide in 1904-1905.

The front cover of the present author's study in Polish, *The Delight of Revenge – A Historical Sociology of Mobilization for Genocide*, Scholar Publishing House, Warsaw 2013



We must also not forget that human nature is not a “constant,” but instead consists more of various values and dispositions (*habitus*) which manifest themselves in certain situations. In this context, it is worth recalling two infamous psychological experiments conducted by Philip Zimbardo and Stanley Milgram. During the Stanford prison experiment, Zimbardo studied the psychological effects of asking students to take on the roles of prisoners and guards at a mock prison. The experiment was terminated after just six days: the situation spiraled out of control when the students acting as guards became increasingly cruel and started exhibiting sadistic tendencies towards their prisoners. In turn, the Milgram experiment involved a series of tests in which volunteer subjects (acting as “teachers”) were instructed to administer electric shocks to “learners” as punishment for giving wrong answers on a word-sequence test. Unbeknown to the subjects, the learners were undercover actors, pretending to be in pain. The teachers were encouraged to continue administering the shocks by an experimenter, who was also an undercover actor. In spite of the learners’ apparent distress (such as their pleading to stop and cries of pain) and the teachers having been informed that the learners’ lives were in danger from the shocks, the subjects continued to follow orders. Both the experiments are said to demonstrate the key importance of situational factors: in other words, people behave humanely in humane situations.

Genocides are not a sudden result of a single decision; the conditions that facilitate

them arise gradually over a period of time. As such, it is more appropriate to talk about the genocide process rather than genocide as a homogenous and uniform act of extermination. This approach was first proposed by Leo Kuper; today it is widely accepted in genocide studies. Mobilization for genocide depends on a number of factors, or – more precisely – on a certain configuration of them. Once started, the mobilization process may be halted, or it may end up being limited to a number of massacres. Mobilization does not stem from a unilateral process, such as a shift in the perpetrators’ social outlook, but rather is a dynamic relationship between future perpetrators, victims and witnesses. It does not occur outside of the perpetrators’ awareness and intentions, although an action plan does tend to appear gradually during the mobilization process.

Tamed nemesis

All of this is not to say that each and every one of us is just one step away from becoming complicit in genocide. While collective violence and cruelty have accompanied humankind from the dawn of civilization, only a handful of actual genocides have been perpetrated. Still, the roots of these inconceivable crimes rest deep in our everyday existence. Genocide is not a sudden anomaly in the functioning of society, a demonic specter haunting humankind. It is a constant threat lurking in the background, and given certain conditions, it can arise again. Objective, comparative studies of genocide should enable us to devise a model explaining the mechanisms behind mobilization for genocide, so that we can estimate the risks of its recurrence, and to act accordingly to prevent it. Knowing humankind’s propensity for destruction, we must harbor no illusion that we live in an era when our species’ greatest crimes will never be repeated. ■

Further reading:

- Bloxham D., Moses A.D. (eds.) (2010). *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Newman L.S., Erber R. (eds.) (2002) *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Welzer H. (2005). *Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* [Perpetrators: How Perfectly Normal People Become Mass Murderers]. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer.