A Genocide Theory: in Search of Knowledge and the Quest for Meaning

Genocide Studies has a short history, dating back at most to the end of World War II, prompted by the revelation of the acts of massacre committed by the Nazi State, in particular the annihilationist mass killings of European Jews. This confrontation with a reality that went beyond the parameters of traditional imaginations did not immediately register. Several years went by before scholars – at first numbed by the immensity of the killings – hesitatingly started to explore the phenomenon of the Holocaust in the late 1950s, by which time the term genocide had entered their vocabulary, as a result of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Till then, the only words at their disposal had been the more general “massacre,” designating large-scale killings; the more precise “Voelkermord” (“murder of a people”), applied by German scholars to the destruction of the Herero people in German Southwest Africa; and the idea of “Vernichtungskrieg” (“war of annihilation”), originally used by the German High Command after the 1871 unification and, increasingly, by advocates of a greater Germany prior to World War I.

While Holocaust Studies began to gain momentum during the 1960s and 1970s, the study of other genocides or near-genocides lagged seriously behind, almost to the point of invisibility, with a few dramatic exceptions. Literally all eyes were on the Holocaust, giving the false impression that it stood alone, apart from all other incidents of mass murder. Thus, even as the examination of other genocides began in the 1980s, the quantitative gap between Holocaust scholarship and genocide research widened, leading to the general conclusion that, in order to understand genocide per se, one need only probe the example of the Holocaust for a satisfactory answer. In the absence of sufficient non-Holocaust studies, the Holocaust became the paradigm for all genocides by default. This imbalance remains to this day, though the gap is no longer so overwhelming. Following the twin shocks of the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia and of the bloodshed in Rwanda in the 1990s, and now the dual genocidal threats in Sudan (in the South and West) – genocide studies has assumed a life of its own and has managed to get out from under the inhibiting shadow of the Holocaust.

Even as the Holocaust is being integrated into the study of genocide – as one genocide among many – two central issues have come to the fore. The first is acquiring sufficient knowledge about individual genocides in order to develop valid general principles and to gain meaningful insights on the subject; the second is accumulating enough insights in order to understand the phenomenon of genocide as broadly as interpretation permits. The former goal may be achieved through comparison; the latter rests on a multidisciplinary approach. Both require considerable progress. At present, much is said about genocide that is based on weak empirical data, and many statements on the subject are akin to improvisation rather than to disciplined logic and bona fide well-informed reasoning.

Given language requirements, it often is not possible to research more than one case of genocide in the same depth. More often than not, researchers attempting to compare them must rely on translated materials and secondary sources for the second case. An effective comparative approach must be based on more than two cases in order to allow us to try to build a framework for a typology of genocide, including sub-types, which clearly delineate differences and similarities. This, in turn, must rest on a detailed anatomy of genocide. Comparison must be based on an agreed-upon minimal structure of genocide comprising three phases: the pre-genocidal stage, the event itself, and the post-genocide stage. Each one must be broken down into different elements, such as ideology for phase one, the elite involved in carrying out the genocide for phase two, and trials for phase three. Each phase should include several categories and sub-categories, of course, which are not necessarily the same for each case of genocide. Some are more complex than others. In terms of instruments, for example, the génocidaires of the Final Solution were armed and equipped with a
whole array of industrial techniques and weaponry, whereas those of Rwanda used the simplest of tools – machetes, clubs and often fire (arson).

This carefully controlled use of comparison, guided by a blueprint for the anatomy of genocide, will allow us to define basic principles and avoid false ones. Thus, for example, the earliest general interpretations of genocide were drawn almost exclusively from the Holocaust, leading to incorrect observations. According to one of these, genocide was a product of modernity; actually, the Rwandan case contradicts this assumption. This parochial approach also led to the attribution of incorrect characteristics to the Holocaust, namely, that while other genocides were restricted to the borders of a state, the Hitlerian State had a broader program of extermination, covering the European continent at least. In fact, Ottoman rulers, in their genocidal assault against the Armenians, did not restrict themselves to their own Armenian minority population; when the opportunity arose, they also hunted down Armenians beyond their borders, in the trans-Caucasian provinces of the Russian Empire. Thus, erroneous conclusions can be avoided by acquiring a broader panoramic view of how each genocide was carried out. As a new generation of scholars is emerging, with expertise in more than one genocidal event, such false assumptions are less frequently made than in the past.

Knowledge of genocides is making rapid progress, though too much attention is still being paid to whether a mass killing is indeed genocide; this opens a veritable Pandora’s Box of disputes that are closer to an exercise in arid sophistry than to the pursuit of knowledge. Nevertheless, information as to how a particular genocide evolved, broke out, and was terminated, is rapidly increasing. Gaps in the understanding of the mechanisms of various genocides are being filled, thereby facilitating a comparative approach based on solid evidence rather than on poor information and conjecture. Increasingly, genocides are recognized as having their own particularities, but sharing a common foundation – the concept of genocide, an act of extermination.

This leads us to a central question – if not the ultimate question – regarding genocide, namely: what is the essence of genocide? Studying every case of genocide comparatively and multidisciplinarily provides no definitive answer. A sheer accumulation of knowledge, however well-organized and observed from different disciplinary viewpoints, does not directly raise the question – let alone answer it; neither does a high degree of familiarity with many wars automatically shed light on the nature of warfare. Then what is genocide, beyond its definition? What are the implications of the fact that genocide is part of an arsenal for the mass destruction of humankind? Given its prominence through centuries of human history, empirical evidence does not allow one to conclude conveniently that genocide is an aberration and those who commit it are abnormal. To probe the core meaning of genocide, one must come to terms with its ubiquity across the ages, transcending political, cultural and temporal lines. Unless this is disproved, genocide must lie at the heart of human motivations. What does this mean?

Meaning is a slippery quality, for it essentially lies in the eye of the beholder. Basically, genocide means what we want it to mean, like any other mode of human behavior. Meaning lies in the realm of interpretation. While analysis is the act of exposing structural reality – such as the anatomical parts of genocide – interpretation comes from the confrontation, the response of the mind scrutinizing the basic idea of genocide, well beyond polemical and partisan concerns. However, so that interpretation does not become excessively theoretical and wander off into pure fiction, it must be limited to the observation of the general limits set by actual genocides.

To date, there has been only one in-depth study of the general meaning of genocide as it has manifested itself through history. It is to be found in Mark Levene’s The Meaning of Genocide, the first volume of his work Genocide in the Age of the Nation State. He mostly – though not exclusively – restricts his analysis to the political dimension of history, and to the West, as his second volume clearly shows. To Levene, genocide is essentially a product of Western modes of violence: nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Unfortunately, this cultural bias leads him to omit
discussion of non-Western-inspired acts of genocide in the rest (over half) of the world. Theological, philosophical, and metaphysical dimensions are almost non-existent in Levene’s search for the meaning of genocide beyond the here-and-now.

But before venturing into the realm of genocide comprehension beyond the parameters set by Levene, one needs to be aware of the danger posed by genocides-to-be as a key characteristic of the post-1989 era, the prelude to the early 21st century. With the collapse of the Soviet system, ethnic conflicts have taken center stage. Those in Sri Lanka, in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda are proving to be previews of a host of genocidal crises. Multi-ethnic post-colonial states are the subject of increasing concern: their viability beyond the new century is seriously in question. The phenomenon of the failing state looms larger every year; Nigeria, India and Indonesia are likely candidates. They may be the Sudans of tomorrow. The polarization of ethnic conflicts over land, oil etc. are undermining the State’s capacity to hold its national territory together. In an age of intensifying ethnic identification throughout the world and growing shortages of scarce resources, a struggle for group survival can easily escalate into exterminational violence, in the absence of strong, inclusive central governments. The failure to accommodate minorities only fans the flames of intolerance and exclusion, both of which are precursors to large-scale killings. Policy-makers will have their hands full identifying pre-crises in order to stem the eruption of genocidal violence, in a world apparently disposed (predisposed?) to genocide. So what is this phenomenon which claims so many victims, and refuses to be fully tamed?

Fundamentally, the act of genocide embodies Man’s willingness to destroy an entire segment of the human population. The propensity to destroy a group of humans is universal: the potential for this is present in all societies. Given the right circumstances, the ability to commit genocide is easily converted into an act of genocide. As such, genocide is a collective enterprise: it involves collective thought, followed by collective deeds. The more a group defines its identity in narrow terms, the more it is likely – under pressure – to consider an annihilationist mode of behavior. This can be found in all cultures threatened by another. There is nothing Asian or European or colonial about genocide: like the universal tendency to go to war, there is a similar urge to use violence of a more radical kind, on an exterminational level. In that sense, genocide belongs to the category of natural behavior, and not aberrant behavior. It follows that those who commit genocide are not bestial but human, no more and no less perverse than warriors, since genocidal wars are seen as wars against an enemy that must be totally erased, an existential war calling for sacrifice and heroics, as in any other war. In other words, before we undertake to understand genocide, we must be aware that it belongs entirely within the scope of normal human behavior. All other interpretations aiming to apprehend it must be limited by this caveat: genocide stems from humanity and not from a supposed perversion of it, even partially. In other words, genocide does not originate from a non-human source. But this is not to say that genocide does not affect those seeking to transfer some of the burden of responsibility from human nature to the meta-human dimension.

It is tempting to avoid the psychological consequences of assigning full responsibility for genocide to the human species, and many resort to attributing genocide to non-human factors such as wickedness, or age-old satanic forces. Rather than limiting genocide to the three-dimensional, human level of a secular crime, these analysts add another element – morality. To them, genocide is an evil emanating from the instigator of all wickedness, namely, the devil. In this view, humans – the génocidaires – become the instruments of evil. This may be some consolation on the psychological level, but it does not facilitate understanding. By dehumanizing genocide one ends up with a misconception of its significance. Consequently, if we are aiming for a realistic assessment of genocide as a human phenomenon, as part of the human condition, we must opt for a secular approach.

So within the confines of secularity, what can one conclude about the meaning of genocide? One cardinal rule is limiting the evidence; that is, the data must be strictly empirical. Thus, underlying genocidal ideas are an aspect of totalism. Ending up with a genocidal frame of mind calls for a totalistic orientation, which means seeking to eradicate a group of fellow humans and being well
aware that conversely, in the right circumstances, the victims would exercise the same existential violence against the génocidaires if given the opportunity (i.e. the power). This awareness obviates the argument that the victims are on another moral plane. They may be innocent at the moment, but as human beings they are still potentially capable of committing the same crime of wiping out an entire group. In that sense, it is sheer good fortune that some groups are not guilty of genocide (or attempted genocide); this is simply the case because the opportunity has not come their way - yet. In other words, the act of genocide is never far from the surface. It lies dormant universally, until it is activated by a combination of three overlapping factors: power (ability), incentive (motive), and circumstances (opportunity). So where does this take one on the road to understanding?

In brief, the sum total of acts of genocide committed by human beings against others spells out a disturbing message: the human species is inherently predestined to annihilate itself. Naturally, that message can be heard in other fields, and is often associated to technology (nuclear warfare), damage to the environment (water, air, soil), and depletion of vital resources. In that sense, humans are not making the planet uninhabitable just for themselves, but for all forms of life. Seen through the prism of this argument, genocide is nothing but a form of mass suicide. The biosphere is in grave danger. From this viewpoint, genocide becomes just one variation of the march of humanity towards its own extinction. What then of the study of individual, specific acts of genocide? How do they contribute to this interpretation? Or do some deviate from the norm of this purported common denominator of all genocides? Are they all part and parcel of the same phenomenon, despite their individual signatures and parochial meanings? Is the theory – that genocide is a form of collective suicide – viable? Can the theory of “species-cide” be sustained? And if the theory is true, what are some of its ramifications?

Once again, prevention takes a front seat, but it requires a radical new strategy; henceforth, genocide prevention will have to be carried out on the scale of the species’ survival. This begs the question of whether genocide is actually that deeply imbedded in the human psyche. Prior to devising a strategy for ad hoc prevention, policy-makers will have to consult philosophers, psychologists and pedagogues on whether humankind is indeed prone to self-destruction and genocide is one of the instruments with which it gradually destroys itself. Should the theory hold true, then radical readjustments will have to be made in the way we apprehend humanity and its fatal flaws. If our understanding of genocide is correct, then a mental revolution must take place if the world is to become a safer place for its human inhabitants.

Of course, there is no direct path from a particular case of genocide to the concept itself. Each one contributes differently to the fund of empirical evidence. The individual fates of minorities – the existential plight of Muslims in Pol Pot’s Cambodia; the Jews of Europe under Hitler; the Armenians in Ottoman Turkey – were all victims of totalistic intolerance. Ideologies – from the Left and Right, nationalist and internationalist – provided rationalizations for eliminating humans from the global population. In this way, the study of specific genocides and near-genocidal events contributes, piece by piece, to an ever-deepening recognition of the meaning of genocide in the context of human history.