Toward a Theory of Critical Genocide Studies

The Liberal Theory of Genocide

The inability of Genocide Studies to predict or interdict genocides is a problem (Moses, 2006), and it is worthwhile considering why. Constituted mainly by social scientists from North America, the field has been dominated by the nomothetic approach that seeks hard knowledge in the form of universal laws with predictive potential. The idiographic approach of historians has not prevailed. Above all, it sought to elucidate a general theory of genocide by identifying the central elements in a genocidal conjuncture in the manner of a mathematical equation. For example, for Helen Fein, a leading figure in the field:

*Genocide is viewed theoretically... as a strategy that ruling elites use to resolve real solidarity and legitimacy conflicts or challenges to their interests against victims decreed outside their universe of obligation in situations in which a crisis or opportunity is caused by or blamed on the victim (or victim impedes taking advantage of an opportunity) and the perpetrators believe that they can get away with it* (1993: 813. Emphasis added).

As with many of the social sciences, then, the object of inquiry represents a theory rather than investigates the complexities of the cases or how they related to one another. For this reason, the discipline necessarily proceeds comparatively: each country/genocide serves as a mine of information to test overarching concepts, laws, or models. Each case is considered basically independent from the other and is thus available for use as data in a social scientific experiment about the dependent and independent variables. Implicit in this method is a developmental perspective which assumes that social change is endogenetic, i.e., that domestic social structures drive change or that social change is propelled by forces internal to societies. Consequently, the unit of analysis in genocide studies is a society, usually a nation-state.

This approach has yielded impressive insights. Fein, for instance, developed a typology of genocides in which she identified four types: ideological, retributive, developmental or despotic (1990), while Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn distinguished between those that seek to implement an ideology, eliminate a threat (real or perceived), acquire wealth, or spread terror (1990). Others have developed schemata of their own. We have, then, useful categories to compare and contrast genocides. Indeed, to its immense credit, genocide studies has been genuinely comparative, rejecting the rhetoric of Holocaust uniqueness in favor of a broad, ostensibly non-hierarchical approach. For example, Steven T. Katz’s *The Holocaust in Historical Context* (1994), with its argument about the supposed phenomenological uniqueness of the Holocaust, was roundly condemned as quixotic, even chauvinist.

Theoretical Problems

The theoretical and comparative focus of the field, however, led to a number of problems. For one, the literature became bogged down in rather tedious and ultimately irresolvable definitional debates, which were eventually only settled by disciplinary fiat. Clearly, these debates were unavoidable for one cannot compare cases without a common measure. But for reasons I will suggest shortly, leading genocide scholars took the Holocaust as the paradigm of genocide despite their ostensible rejection of Holocaust uniqueness. Ignoring or rejecting Raphael Lemkin’s own capacious definition, which included non-murderous techniques of genocide, they redefined it as an ideologically-motivated and state-executed program of mass killing. For instance, in their widely used book *The History and Sociology of Genocide* (1990), Chalk and Jonassohn criticized the UN Convention as inadequate because it omits political and social groups but includes non-lethal forms of group destruction. They wanted to confine genocide to mass killing: it is “a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator” (1990: 23).
The prolific genocide scholar Barbara Harff echoed this line of thinking when she defined genocide “as a particular form of state terror ... mass murder, pre-meditated by some power-wielding group linked with state power.” The background assumption was made explicit in her aside that “The Jewish Holocaust... is employed as the yardstick, the ultimate criterion for assessing the scope, methods, targets, and victims of [other] genocides” (1986: 165-66. Emphasis added). In an influential article, Harff and Ted Gurr followed the trend of excluding the non-lethal techniques of genocide in the UN Convention “because,” as they wrote, “this extends the definition to innumerable instances of groups which have lost their cohesion and identity, but not necessarily their lives” (1988: 360).

The line we should follow was made clear by Chalk when he argued that “we must never forget that the great genocides of the past have been committed by [state] perpetrators who acted in the name of absolutist or utopian ideologies aimed at cleansing and purifying their worlds.” (1994: 58). In its initial incarnation, then, genocide studies was really a version of totalitarianism theory because by definition a genocide—at least a true one—can only be committed by a totalitarian or at least authoritarian state.

Largely forgotten here were the colonial genocides about which Lemkin had written so much in his unpublished writing (McDonnell and Moses, 2005). It is to the lasting credit of Chalk and Jonassohn that they included colonial cases in their well-known anthology, but apart from outsiders like David Stannard in the USA and Tony Barta in Australia, colonial cases were not regarded as particularly interesting or important. There is a blindness at work here that led a prominent historian to concede that although “it was the hand-in-glove pressure of American settlers and the military might deployed by the government of the United States that destroyed large numbers of the American Indians,” this fact revealed nothing about “the nature of American society” (Chalk, 1994: 56-57). If we are searching for what I have elsewhere called “conceptual blockages” in the discipline, here they are (Moses, 2002).

The restriction of the meaning of genocide in this way is not surprising. The Cambodian auto-genocide had occurred at the moment of the foundation of Genocide Studies, and the colonial period had long passed in the Anglophone settler colonies. There was also a Cold War imperative. Most North American genocide scholars are liberals for whom the answer to totalitarianism and genocide is the United States and its willing coalition partners. If the rest of the world were like the US, so the thinking goes, genocide would no longer occur. If the US is guilty of anything it is of sins of omission, as Samantha Power argued in her book, “A Problem from Hell” (2002).

This approach dovetails neatly with the implicit modernization theory in comparative Genocide Studies: genocides occur in societies—“failed states,” we often hear today (eg. Harff, 2003)—that have experienced perverted modernizations. Had they followed the western, preferably the North American, road to modernity, it is implied, they would not have become totalitarian states and perpetrated genocide on their own or neighboring populations. Leaving aside the fact that this rosy view ignores the fate of the Native Americans, it can be identified as an American version of what we historians of Germany recognize immediately as the now highly suspect Sonderweg approach to comparative historical sociology.

Either way the US and, more generally, the West, is regarded as the redeeming power in world affairs, whether as the agent of liberalization or as the cavalry that rescues victims from genocidal elites and their militias in the “Third World.” When Mark Levene suggested otherwise at the fourth biennial “International Association of Genocide Scholars” conference at the University of Minnesota on June 10, 2001, he was rebuked by leaders in the field with the epithets that he was anti-American, “ideological,” and such heresies. Yet how ideological is a position that wants to ignore the genocidal foundation of settler colonies like the US and Australia, and question the theodicy that the westernization of the globe will lead to a world in which genocide has been banished?

Their chapters present global instances of genocide—the Kiernan/Gellately volume in particular includes cases that customarily receive less attention—but they do not give much of a sense of how they are related to one another except as instances of a definition. An integrated organization on ethnic cleansing is offered by the sociologist Michael Mann in his big work *The Dark Side of Democracy*. A neo-Weberian, Mann is reluctant to offer a single theory, and instead employs an ensemble of concepts of how nation states negotiate the tension between *ethnos* and *demos*, and the problem of national minorities – ranging from assimilation to extermination – to understand how and why states radicalize in the direction of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Like another Weberian, Reinhard Bendix, who wrote on nation and state formation in equally sweeping terms, Mann presents no overarching theory of what drives change and escalation on a global scale. In the end each chapter is a case study in the conventional mode of comparative sociology, in this case utilizing ideal types to categorize the material. Of the Holocaust, he admits that “it had too many peculiarities to fit easily into any general model” (503).

Progress has been made with two books by the American historians Norman Naimark and Eric Weitz. Because of their disciplinary background, perhaps, they are inclined to honor the specificity of individual cases and reluctant to subsume them mechanically under an overarching category. Naimark avers that “comparative reflection on the problems of ethnic cleansing also leads to the conclusion that each case must be understood in its full complexity, in its own immediate context, rather than merely as part of a long term historical conflict between nations” (2001: 16), while Weitz says he is averse to large scale generalization and lawmaking to which many social scientists are prone (2003: 11).

Both writers also attempt to situate ethnic cleansing and genocide in broader processes. Naimark thinks “its traces can be seen in every society, and its potentiality is part of us all,” and he claims that the broader context is what he calls the “high modernism” of the nation state at its highest state of development (2001: 186). Similarly, Weitz maintains that genocides are “embedded in complex historical processes, notably, the emergence in the modern world of race and nation as the primary categories of political and social organization” (2003: 2) His aim is to write “a comparative study that tries to be faithful to the historian’s propensity for detail, nuance, and contingency, but that also goes beyond an individual case to examine how, in the modern world, political models (not only capital and commodities) move in global space.” And he goes so far to say that genocides lie at the center of our “contemporary cultural crisis” (2003: 8-11).

As historians, both authors are also alive to the historically specific conjunctures that issue forth in genocide: they do not happen randomly at any time. Consequently, they embed the unfolding twentieth-century catastrophes—principally in Europe—in the First World War and its aftermath. To their credit, Naimark and Weitz – both experts on the history of European communism – raise the profile of ethnic cleansing and genocide in the Soviet Union—the fate of the North Caucasian Muslims, for instance—and the expulsion of ethnic Germans from central Europe after the Second World War. And yet, the break with the intellectual traditions of comparative genocide studies is incomplete. The continuing links manifest themselves in a number of ways:

1. The nation-state remains the object of analysis rather than the process or crisis that they incarnate or to which they are responding. The broader context is background rather than foreground.
2. The preoccupation with modern state, revolutionary politics, and utopian ideologies continues (Weitz, 2003: 6-7). Both books focus largely on totalitarian cases. Weitz, for instance, recognizes that pre-twentieth-century genocides include, as he puts it, “European settlers acting under the aegis of liberal states [who] annihilated indigenous populations in Australia and North America,” as well as German Southwest Africa and the Soviet deportations of the 1930s, noting that in “none of these states did genocide come to constitute the nearly exclusive, central motor of the systems” (2003: 10). So while not denying that they are genocides, he has deemed them less worthy of our intellectual attention.
3. They are also preoccupied with illiberal elites in the manner of Helen Fein in her much-cited definition quoted above. Genocides “were ignited by the warped ambitions of modern politicians,” writes Naimark (2001: 16). Utopianism is also a culprit for Weitz: “they shared a
common orientation in their determination to remake fundamentally the societies and states they had either conquered or inherited” (2003: 237). No mention is made of the extensive literature on modernity and biopolitics that ascribes genocidal outcomes less to extreme ideologies than to logics inherent in the modern state itself (cf. Moses, 2008a).

4. The whiff of an implicit rational choice theory, an idiosyncrasy of North American social science, is discernible in some passages in which war is depicted as an opportunity for the implementation of such ideologies. We are back to Fein’s general theory of genocide with its various elements: ideologies of race and nation; revolutionary regimes with utopian aspirations of social or ethnic purity, moments of crisis generated by war and upheaval.

These two books, therefore, still exemplify the methodological assumptions of comparative sociology by proposing a general concept and offering case studies to bear it out. The danger of tautology is evident here when Weitz says that his “four case studies ... display some notably common features, especially in relation to the historical origin and practice of genocide,” a conclusion to which one can come depending on the selection of cases. The circularity is admitted in the statement that “The commonalities I have found among them may not apply to every single case of genocide; other historical factors may come into play in other situations” (2003: 251).

Here we see that the restriction of genocide to revolutionary utopian social projects can only be sustained by willfully excluding cases that are not revolutionary utopian social projects.

A final similarity is the insistence on contingency: genocide is not inevitable, nor does it follow any specific logics. Other regimes had multiracial ideologies, for instance. The nation-building process itself does not issue in genocide necessarily. “There is then,” Weitz argues, a very substantial element of contingency to the emergence of genocides related to very specific conjunctures” (2003: 251). But if genocide is contingent upon a crisis of some kind, and we are in the middle of some kind of deeper “cultural crisis,” as he puts it, should they and it not be the study of sustained reflection?

A great advancement has been made by Ben Kieran’s monumental new book, Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur (2007). As the subtitle indicates, the author’s perspective is global and he is interested in genocide before the twentieth century. In fact, he devotes attention, as Lemkin did himself (cf. McDonnell and Moses, 2005), to the Spanish conquest of the Americas, as well as a third of the book to a long section on mainly English settler colonialism, with chapters on the English conquest of Ireland, North America, Australia, the USA, and genocides by European powers in Africa in the nineteenth century. These projects were as utopian and revolutionary as the totalitarian ones centuries later, an implicit answer to Naimark and Weitz who seem to take the liberal and progressive nature of settler colonialism for granted. Reflecting Kiernan’s own research expertise on South East Asia, there are also substantial chapters on that region since the fifteenth century. The Euro-centric perspective is also laid aside in the section on the twentieth century, which contains chapters on Maoist China and Japanese imperialism. The inclusion of these cases, temporal and spatial, which are customarily omitted in the obsession with the twentieth century, is a massive improvement in the field of Genocide Studies. For that reason alone, the book will find many appreciative readers.

The inclusion of the Japanese case is explained by a central theme of the book: the link between genocide and imperial expansion. Not that Kiernan thinks imperial expansion is necessarily genocidal. A genocidal conjuncture occurs when four elements combine: racist thinking is embedded in a nostalgic ideology of agricultural expansionism that features a cult of pastoral cultivation and ethnic antiquity (Kiernan, 2007: 21-35). Particularly valuable also is the attention given to the learning processes of elites as they invoke historical analogies—like the destruction of Carthage—as models for their own policies and practices. This is a comparative and temporal vision that only the world history approach can provide.

For all its considerable virtues, the book remains within the liberal paradigm. Its focus is on genocidal ideology, which Kiernan explains as a nostalgic reaction to the changes wrought by early modernity (the fifteenth century) – urbanization, commercialization and seaborne colonialism. The idea of racial anti-modernism as heart of illiberal politics has been common in German historiography for half a century (e.g. Stern, 1961; Mosse 1964), but how reactionary was English colonization in theory or practice? As Niall Ferguson celebrates, the British Empire was a driver of modernity, equated with
progress and European civilization. Indeed, what does this Empire really have in common with Al Qaeda, which Kiernan suggests shares the same pattern? One needs to distinguish between imperialism and anti-imperialism very carefully to identify their different genocidal modalities (cf. Moses, 2008b). Moreover, the method of the book is ultimately descriptive as well. The links between cases are not historical in the sense that genocides are manifestations of single process or even logics, or that one set of events engenders another (Kiernan, 2007: 35). They are cases that share the same pattern, a pattern that is certainly historically more nuanced and plausible than those offered by Fein, Chalk, and others, but only a set of shared features rather than organic connections nonetheless.

**Explanatory Lacunae in the Conventional Model**

These, then, are the features and concomitant problems of what I call the liberal theory of comparative genocide studies. But what is it precisely that the field cannot explain? Ultimately, it cannot account satisfactorily for why genocides occur. Its theory that genocidal elites perpetrate them in the name of a social utopia begs the question of the origin of such elites, why they are possessed by certain ideologies, and the nature of the crises that call them forth? The problem with the literature is that it takes too much for granted: revolution, expansion, and genocide are presented as givens in the context of which the real action takes place. For example, Weitz speculates that genocides in the twentieth century became so extensive and systematic because regimes engaged in massive social projects of mobilization for mass activities, like the construction of dams and population purges (2003: 15). That observation is fine as far as it goes, but the real question surely is why such regimes feel compelled to engage in them? What drives them? The same objection can be made to Kiernan’s point that his nostalgic cults of antiquity and agriculture are responses to modernization crises.

The liberal method posits ideology as the prime mover of nefarious policies, but is it? The same question can be posed of ideology: what is the origin of expansionist or redemptive ideologies and what function do they serve? Likewise, if even ideology needs to be mediated by crisis to result in genocide, why focus on the contents of ideology as the independent variable instead of on the crisis? It is necessary, then, to account for the crises that have punctuated European, and indeed world history, for centuries. Naimark, Weitz, and Kiernan mention many conjunctures and hint at deeper processes, but the liberal method to which they subscribe means that they remain under-illuminated.

There are far-reaching consequences if we did study them, for we would need to revise the determination about genocide’s contingency – emphasized by all authors discussed so far – concluding perhaps that they are as inevitable as the periodic crises that befall global society; indeed, that they are intrinsic to our global system. This reasoning leads me to conclude that in order to understand the genesis of genocide we need to revise the dominant, liberal methodology. Rather than look within the empire or nation-state alone—the endogenetic bias of nomothetic social science and comparative historiography—we need to cast our gaze beyond it to the global context in which they have to compete for survival. It is time to consider the proposition that the missing variable in the equation is the exogenous pressure of the international state and economic system; and to try to imagine the genocides of modernity as part of a single process rather than merely in comparative (and competitive) terms.

**Towards a Critical Theory of Genocide**

I wish to call such an alternative method a Critical Theory of Genocide or Critical Genocide Studies. In doing so, I recall the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory and in particular by Max Horkheimer’s programmatic essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory.” Certainly, this tradition cannot be approached without caution. Too much Hegelian-Marxist humanism pervades this thinking of the 1930s to be plausible for us today. Thus Horkheimer argues that the positivist positing of objective facts can be sublated by the recognition that since history is really the product of the collective human subject, though alienated from that subject because it is not made consciously in a controlled manner, the historical world can be viewed as a potentiality to be molded according to human will rather than as objectively given. He therefore advocated the unity of theory and practice so that scholarly cognition
becomes a means by which to realize political goals, goals that he posited as immanent in the historical process.

However, other aspects of his argument remain compelling. The first is that theory needs to reflect on its own role in the process of societal reproduction. Traditional theory, he observed, was a function of the industrial system because it promoted a knowledge that made available the world as a place for human manipulation according to a means-end rationality. It was “a cog in an already existent mechanism” (Horkheimer, 1982: 216). Critical Theory, by contrast, aims to produce knowledge that transcends the societal conditions that produced its periodic crises. For those of us who study genocide, this is surely a pressing imperative. Is it not true, after all, that the liberal theory of genocide highlights specific phenomena but fails to illuminate the nature of the system that produces it? And don’t we want our findings to be linked intrinsically to the establishment of a world in which genocide has been banished? The concept of theory, Horkheimer urged, needs to move world society to a new state of development.

The second, compelling dimension of Critical Theory is its holistic or dialectical approach, that is, its focus on “totality”: or—to use an analogy from economic theory—general equilibrium analysis rather than partial equilibrium analysis. In this respect, the Hegelian heritage retains its usefulness. The “true is the whole,” Hegel wrote in The Phenomenology of the Spirit, meaning for us that the individual instances of genocide we study cannot be understood other than as dialectically mediated moments of a global system. We need to study the entire system, in other words, not just its constituent parts. Horkheimer proposed that a critical theory not proceed, therefore, like traditional theory, which focuses on specific phenomena and tries to relate concepts to reality by way of hypotheses. Instead, Critical Theory proceeds historically by showing how the capitalist system functions and unfolds over time. It is not a storehouse of concepts and categories with which to interpret the course of events, then, but an internally integrated view that constructs a complete picture of a historically evolving global society as a whole.

“World Systems Theory” and Genocide: Immanuel Wallerstein and Mark Levene

What is here concretely for a critical study of genocide and where should we look for tools? I have found that Immanuel Wallerstein “World Systems Theory” offers the necessary paradigm shift. I do not have the space here to rehearse the intricacies of his approach, but suffice it to say that the virtue inheres identifying the existence of such a system and making it what the social scientists call a “unit of analysis,” that is, the object of research. The chapters of his books, then, are not conventional comparisons of cases, searching for uniform laws by isolating variables, but illustrations of a posited world system. Like the Frankfurt School, he presumes the existence of a basic structure of economic life that drives history and seeks to bear it out in his focused studies. He thus works historically, laying bare the unfolding of system (Wallerstein, 1974).

This approach challenges the complacent assumptions of conventional Genocide Studies. Is the Westernization or Americanization of the world really the answer to genocide? In this reading, globalization is actually the opposite, namely, a harbinger of them because semi-peripheral states are driven to strive for accelerated developmental agendas in order to maintain or improve their status in a highly competitive world system

Fruitful as Wallerstein’s approach is, it has little to say about genocide or the Holocaust. In fact, in a recent book, World Systems Analysis: An Introduction (2004), those two concepts do not arise at all, although he covers the twentieth century. Apparently, unless phenomena can be indentured to what he thinks drives the system—the endless accumulation of capital—they do not warrant inclusion or explanation.

There is a practitioner in our field, however, who has operationalized Wallerstein’s general insights systematically in an integrated research program that seeks to apply them to genocide. That is Mark Levene of Southampton University. In his many articles and two volume magnum opus, Genocide in the Age of the Nation State (2005), he takes the Wallerstein approach as his background and focuses on the crises that produce genocide. The principle virtue of his argument, in my view, is that it takes the international states’ system, particularly, the rise of the West, as its object of analysis rather than individual nation states. The latter cannot be understood except in interaction with others. His
volumes aim to lay bare these connections rather than present narrative history. As he puts it in the preface to volume two, he is “less concerned with detailing an exact chronological plot and more with developing a theoretical approach and geared towards introducing the reader to broad patterns, processes and inter-connections between what may often be quite unfamiliar instances of genocide” (2005: 2, 4). In a series of important articles in the Journal of Genocide Research, Levene placed this potential for genocide in the context of a more general political-spatial crisis caused by the international system, a crisis that was perhaps above all environmental (2004a, b).

Distinctive in the twentieth century, is the arrival of the nation state, rather than the multi-national empire, as the normative form of political organization. The international system now comprises competitive nation states rather than such empires, with the result that the imperative for sovereign autonomy collides with the reality that such new states are usually not demographically homogeneous yet must mobilize their internal population and natural resources in a disciplined way to wrest control of their affairs—as nation states by nature do—from former colonial/imperial masters. For these reasons, the twentieth century has been the most deadly of all. As he writes in volume one of his Genocide in the Age of the Nation State:

Only after the Second World War and, more specifically, in the era of European post-colonial retreat did genocide become a truly global phenomenon, most obviously facilitated through the extension of the Western-created concept of the nation-state to all hemispheres, and with it of the embrace of the entire world’s population as citizens of such states within its international nation-state framework (2005, 1: 164).

We have here then, a Sonderweg of the West, an anti-theodicy that inverts the celebratory rise of the West in the fashionable pro-imperial encomia that are being written today. Far from being a return to barbarism, as Lemkin thought, the twentieth century marks something very new, the paradox of progress and destruction.

But what is it about the nation-state that makes it such a lethal polity? Levene recognizes that the empires were racist, hierarchical and often practiced retributive genocide when challenged, but they were inclusive if subject nations, peoples and cities towed the line. They were not inherently genocidal. Extermination or the effacement of otherness was not a constituent part of their nature. The problem of the nation-state, which begins with the martial French republican state of the 1790s, actually has sources a thousand years earlier in a European peculiarity. Here is the surprising cultural dimension of Levene’s argument; the uniquely European origins of the nation-state. They lie in the unique combination of political power and religious legitimation in the European reaction to the disintegration of the Roman Empire and formation of Western Europe in the Middle Ages (2005, 1: 121). With Christianity as the official religion of small feudal entities, the inevitable conflicts were met with declarations of war on schismatics and heretics, who were scapegoated in a phobic way. This phobic reaction, a pattern and term Levene uses in relation to totalitarian regimes like the Nazis, starts here. This constellation of religion and politics exhibited the:

power of a thought system that, now duly institutionalized as the official religion of the West, adapted itself perfectly well to the new political reality of small or medium-sized aristocratic-led feudal kingdoms, principalities or city-states which gradually emerged out of the debris of empire, or in the Germanic lands, beyond its historical borders. If in this we have a thumbnail sketch of the historic emergence of the “West,” we also have the conditions for the tensions between liberty and uniformity (2005, 2: 125).

The European system of small states emphasized uniformity, a tendency exacerbated in reformation with imposition of national confessions in official church authorities. A corollary was, as mentioned above, a tendency to phobic reactions to threats: there was well-organized plot, religious minorities were seen as dangerous, wicked foreign bodies (2005, 2: 125). There would have been more extermination of schismatic movements had they not been protected by neighboring powers.

Given that the master narrative for Levene, then, is the rise of the West—meaning the rise of the nation state model—the historical turning point is not 1492—the spread of European power abroad in blue water empires, as scholars like David Stannard and other proponents on the colonial genocide thesis maintain—but the French Revolution, with its militarized nationalism and nation state model
borne out of defensive wars. For it was here that the first modern genocide occurred, the counter-insurgency against royalist rebels who, in the new dispensation, were regarded as evil opponents of reason and progress embodied in the new nation. This new ideology knew no internal limits against the extirpation of such opponents, nor was there a chance of conversion, which Christian Europe at least offered heretics and non-Christians. It was a totaling agenda of people making from above, engendering the new religion patriotism, and ultimately mass politics that elites found difficult to contain 100 years later, as German historians skeptical of the Enlightenment, Gerhard Ritter and Friedrich Meinecke, also pointed out.

The imperative for uniformity so characteristic of pre-modern Europe was thus secularized in the nineteenth century. The social glue of religion was replaced by utopian concepts like race or class. Agreeing with critics of modernity like Bauman and Foucault, Levene agrees that liberal colonial and totalitarian leaders shared the utopian ideal to “reformulate the social organism, or body politic in a quite unprecedented fashion” (2005, 2: 113). Here was a state directed model of rapid and militant modernization that was adopted by peoples who wanted to establish and protect their sovereignty. Imperial Germany became the European state embodying it by the end of the nineteenth century, and of course Nazi Germany decades later, which was the most radical modernizer in its drive for population uniformity and internal coherence.

Genocide, then, is explained not by recourse to cultural or political contingencies endogenous to specific nation states, although the cultural perception of their elites remains important, but by the pressure that a competitive, indeed Darwinistic, system of state economies places on national leaderships to establish and maintain sovereign viability. In some cases, usually among the second tier late-comer states (postcolonial) to the club established by Westerners, desperate shortcuts had been taken to accelerate and institutional modernization: by exterminating a native people who live in an area desired for economic exploitation, or by exterminating a minority associated with an external enemy that is held responsible for endangering the nation in a security crisis, or holding back the country’s independent development by effectively representing the interests of a competitor. Thus, under stable conditions, the empires of Eurasian tectonic plate could accommodate considerable national/ethnic diversity, but not when placed under geopolitical pressure by the West. Nor when it favored minorities like the Armenians, who then, in Turkish eyes, became disloyal, indeed, dangerous subjects (2: 223-25).

A target of Levene is also the argument like those of David Stannard, Sven Lindqvist, Jürgen Zimmerer and myself who point to the continuity and links between colonial genocides and twentieth century ones. Levene writes:

by arguing in effect that genocide’s crystallization lies in the various post-1492 phases of European colonialism and imperialism, they do not entirely satisfy as to what the exact relationship is between these events and the significantly greater incidence of twentieth-century mass murders whose hallmarks more closely resemble that of our specific phenomena, and whose context is often only marginal colonial, non-colonial or definitely post-colonial (2005, 1: 174).

And he argues that while the late colonial and imperial surge of violence between 1890 and 1914 was indeed perpetrated by the Empires, the context marked a specific phase in world history: the pressure placed on Chinese, Russian, and Ottoman Empires by the West to compete, to be more efficient, provoked indigenous uprisings. They themselves put down rebellions: Germans and British in Africa, for instance. It was a phase in the rise of the West, whose model of the sovereign nation state was globalized after World War II. Colonialism was still indentured to developmental agenda. So not colonialism but the nation-state is the master concept or key driver of genocide because Britain could not survive without dumping its own internally cleansed people to its imperial fringes: the Scots, the Irish, its proletariat.

These are the preconditions of genocide. What makes them more likely is a confluence of factors: when modernizing elites perceive that their attempts to secure the political and economic sovereignty of their nation state are hampered by national minorities, such as Armenians in the Ottoman Empire or Jews in Imperial Germany, who are regarded as proxies of foreign enemies, and—this is important—were held responsible for the failure of previous attempts at sovereignty, for instance, the perceived Armenian disloyalty in the late nineteenth century, and perceived Jewish and
leftist betrayal of the army between 1917-1920 by weakening the home-front and driving socialist and Bolshevik revolutions. In fact, these minorities were held responsible for national decline over various time frames. The Tutsis may have been overthrown in Rwanda in the early 1960s, but ever since then they harried the new regime, even massacring Hutu in neighboring Burundi. Never again would the national elites permit such minorities to undermine national security and progress again by representing foreign influence, he argues. But that is not all. These elites fantasized about a “powerful and resplendent past” so much that they contrasted with a “diminished and enfeebled present.” Such ideologies served as a compensatory ideology for enervated and traumatized national elites or would-be elites in the present, driving them to vain attempts – genocidal shortcuts – at breaking through to sovereignty. Those minorities held responsible for the troubled present were in mortal danger (2005, 1: 187-99).

On this basis, he can show that it exerts exogenous (external) pressure on local, regional, and national economic subsystems because they are forced to compete for their own survival by protecting their markets and penetrating those of their rivals. The most vicious struggles occur between semi-peripheral states that aim to join the most powerful core group (the West and later, Japan) as they simultaneous attempt to prevent sliding into the oblivion of the peripheral ones. Their activity keeps the system in perpetual disequilibrium, and yet the crises they suffer or unleash can only be understood in systemic terms. Rather than view them under the aspect of the “failed state” paradigm and endogenetic bias of conventional social and historical science, they are products of a system that calls forth crises by subjecting them to the pressure of competition and imperative of withstanding core economic and political penetration.

Critical genocide studies must also account for the radicalization of individual consciousness—that is, ideological radicalization—that attends genocide; we need to consider individual and social psychology, especially the role of paranoia and fantasy. Culture and psychology are not features of Wallerstein’s work, but they also need to be considered in order to trace the manner in which the pressure of the international system is inscribed into individual subjectivity. Happily, Jacques Semelin’s new book, Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide (2007) pays close attention to the social psychological aspect. The French political scientist, who has written extensively about massacres and genocide (2001, 2002a, b, 2003a, b, 2005), has been attempting to convince scholars, much like Martin Shaw in his What is Genocide? (2007), that moving away from the legal definition and invoking Weberian understandings of social action and interpretation will introduce precision and social scientific rigor into the discipline. We need to understand what the perpetrators thought they were doing, he suggests, an analytical imperative that necessarily leads to the dark world of delusion and paranoia, because they were convinced that external and internal enemies were conspiring to destroy their group. That is why they set out to massacre them. Semelin expands on Weber by invoking characteristically French intellectual tools to explore this world: René Girard’s theory of sacrifice and the political imaginaire (or imaginary) as deployed by Georges Lefebvre in his analysis of the “Great Fear” in the summer of 1789. The impulse to purify the body politic of polluting elements is a function of nationalist elites that seek group regeneration, while the imaginaire of panic about putative threats is a necessary if not sufficient condition for genocidal action to take place (Semelin, 2007: 50, 92).

But why the fear in the first place? Here Semelin has recourse to the Italian psychologist Franco Fornani, who applies Kleinian psychoanalytical categories to warfare. The origin of paranoia lies in the universal experience of childhood, when the binary categories of good/bad and friend/enemy develop, and during which the infant worries, in certain circumstances, that it can only survive by destroying the threatening other. This is the famous “paranoid-schizoid position” of Melanie Klein, a theory put to good use by many scholars interested in political paranoia, whether of the political leader (Sagan, 1991) or the terrorist (Robins, 1986; Robins and Post, 1997; Bohleber, 2003, Young, 2003). A society regresses to this position in times of war when its leaders convince the population that national survival depends on the destruction of the (often fantasized) enemy. And such anxieties are fuelled by these leaders—“identity entrepreneurs,” if you like—who believe that they are “victims of History,” humiliated by rival powers, resentful at their subordinate status, and determined to defeat their enemies, including one’s “own” people who are “traitors” and “betrayers” (Semelin: 2007, 24-32, 54). Semelin thus links psychology to politics: such leaders are given opportunities to purvey their delusional fantasies during moments of genuine social and political crisis when they have a ready audience (cf. Ferguson, 2006).
This short discussion cannot do justice to the richness of his important book, which, although social science, avoids the methodological shortcomings outlined above by taking three case studies—the Holocaust, Rwanda, and Yugoslavia—and relating them to many themes, rather than proceeding episodically according to an arbitrary definition. The appearance of this work, along with those of Levene, Kiernan and Shaw show that the limitations of the self-proclaimed “pioneers of genocide studies” (Totten and Jacobs, 2002) are being surmounted by scholars who have made themselves experts in a particular field before embarking on comparative research. The “historiography of genocide” (Stone, 2008) is in good shape because it has also become more critical and self-reflexive.

References


Kiernan, Ben, 2007, Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur, Yale University Press.


