

## Prospects For The Prevention Of Genocide

Kurt Jonassohn, June 2000.

(Paper presented at the World Congress of the International Political Science Association on August 9, 2000 at Université Laval )

Among sociologists it has long been a part of their analysis of social processes that people's perceptions of the world are shaped by their location in the social structure, i.e. by the groups to which they belong. In my introductory course that abstract statement was succinctly explained by my professor (Everett C. Hughes) by pointing out that many doctors believe the whole world to be sick and that policemen often think that everybody is a crook. This illustrates that we all look at the world from the particular vantage point at which we are located. So far this seems like a fairly simple idea that does not require much explanation.

To make the link between such perceptions and their consequences it is useful to make a link between them and their effects on situated actions. Such actions will involve not only the actor but also others involved in the situation. It has been a truism in sociology, ever since the work of Thomas and Znaniecki, that if people define a situation as real it is real in its consequences.

What makes an examination of people's perceptions of the world, and the way they define it, more complicated is the quite obvious fact that we all belong to several groups. Complicated not only because of the diversity of groups to which we belong, but also because these groups may have very different – perhaps even conflicting – effects on our perceptions. The diversity of such groups may cover the gamut from family to occupation, from ethnicity to language and religion, and from ideological to political and avocational groups. But since we all do belong to more than one group, an interesting question arises: which groups have how much effect on the way we perceive the world?

These questions are not new. They are becoming topical again because they arise in connection with contemporary ideas about (1) the one-world notion embodied in the United Nations and (2) the sudden importance of the global economy, embodied in debates about the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and several other bodies involved with managing the economy. These two sets of ideas clearly have an enormous influence. While, on first impression, one might think that they complement each other, they often seem to lead to conflicting definitions of the world. As with all other views of the world, one would like to know how they correspond to "reality" – however that is defined.

These remarks are not meant to introduce an exploration of that question. They have a more modest – though not less important – purpose: to understand what happens to people and groups attempting to deal with gross human rights violations and their potential for escalating into genocidal massacres. To what extent do they misunderstand the world because their analysis is restricted by a conceptual world that they are unable to transcend? To what extent is that conceptual world affected by pressures to conform to dominant world views and to observe the norms of political correctness?

These are daunting questions that I do not pretend to be able to answer; all that I want to present to you here are some aspects or considerations that may help to pave the way to some answers.

An example of these processes is the recent preoccupation with the so-called Y2K problem. Before the end of 1999 attention was largely focused on the range of breakdowns and even catastrophes this problem would cause, how to prepare for these anticipated emergencies, and how to prevent their occurrence. Hardly any attention was accorded to the reasons for these anticipated consequences of the Y2K problem, although they certainly deserve inclusion in the final accounting. There seem to be two possible reasons why this "problem" occurred at all. The first one is that within the "techie" community that designs computing systems there is so little foresight that the quite certain arrival of the year 2000 never entered into their designs. The second, even more cynical, reason is the realization that the very existence of that problem would produce enormous wealth for those trying to prevent or fix it. My own view is that, in all likelihood, both reasons were operating; that is: first there were the dummies who lacked the foresight to take account of the quite certain approach of the year 2000, and then there were the sleazy types who discovered this omission but decided not to correct it because of the prospect of reaping vast and undeserved profits. Finally, as usual, the dire predictions turned out to be entirely off the mark. No serious breakdowns

seem to have occurred beyond those that are reported on an almost daily basis. Even the fragile and out-dated systems operating in poorer countries have survived the dire predictions that were heavily targeted on them. That leaves only one question: Will the computer industry attempt to rationalize what happened or will they simply ignore it in the full knowledge of the public's defective memory for even quite recent events? (Since this was written the answer has become obvious.)

A more serious example may be cited from the quite complex relationships between the first world and the third world. (Does anyone remember what constituted the second world?) After the end of the World War II, the first world initiated several programs to assist with the development of the countries in the third world. Great resources have been devoted to these programs without producing the anticipated results. One of the major reasons for these failures was the repeated insistence of the rich countries to analyse the situation in their own terms rather than planning programs in terms of the situations and the needs of the recipient countries. It seems that Western experts were unable or unwilling to define the needs of others except in terms of their own experience. Thus, the first wave of post-World War II assistance to third world countries was based on the quite simple-minded theory that these countries would recapitulate the same stages of industrialization as had been experienced by the West -- except in much less time.

When it became obvious that this theory was quite wrong a new group of experts developed a theory according to which a developing country could succeed only by copying infrastructural and democratic institutions as they already existed in the rich countries. These experts were so convinced of the truth of their parochial theory that they imposed adherence to it as a condition for receiving loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Again, the accumulating evidence of failure disproves the theory and fuels a new debate on the best way for the rich to assist the poor. This debate is unlikely to lead anywhere until the rich learn to look to the poor to find out what the world looks like through their eyes. What complicates matters is the ever-present question about hidden agendas. In this particular case suspicions have been voiced about the extent to which assistance to the poor is undermined by the desire of the rich to become even richer. The costs incurred by many of the poor countries in order to service their debts turn out to impoverish them further while enriching the lenders.

Finally, we come to the most important example of defining a situation in terms that may serve the aims of the definers but do not contribute to an analysis of that situation. The second half of the twentieth century has been characterized by an enormous increase in gross human rights violations, massacres, and genocides. The desire to prevent such events or to intervene in their escalation is widely shared by the public and by many organizations. These noble intentions tend to be undermined by a tendency to analyse events in terms of the observers' preconceived notions that are abetted by a wide variety of managed information sources. The effects of misinformation and disinformation are difficult to sort out; they may range from ignorance to the deliberate obscuring of the truth. Thus, the media, the politicians, and the scholars often agree in locating the sources of conflict in colonialism, ethnicity, nationalism, and/or religion. These factors may play a role in a particular situation; by themselves they may cause anything from mutual dislike to mutual isolation to hostility; but they are neither necessary nor sufficient causes of violence and aggression.

Whatever the role of these factors, they are usually cited while the pervasive effects of the search for greater power and for increasing wealth is often ignored. These latter two factors are in a category by themselves because they have the unfortunate characteristic that they are always satisfied at someone else's expense. By definition, the search for power and for wealth is defined as a short-term process that inevitably produces victims. The perpetrators gain in power reduces the power of the victims; their gain in wealth reduces the wealth of the victims proportionately.

The United Nations, several regional associations, as well as a number of international agreements are attempting to curb the search for power. They have had a modest measure of success, but much remains to be done. One of the problems facing those who are attempting to limit the search for power is the vexing issue of sovereignty. That issue has emerged as a major dimension affecting the implementation of human rights agreements because the great majority of violations of these agreements are committed within nation states. I will not comment further on the role of power at this meeting of political scientists who are the specialists in the study of power.

However, no national or international mechanisms have even been suggested to limit the drive for wealth. Any such suggestion is perceived as an attack on capitalism and branded as a threat to its system. This is another dramatic effect of mistaken perceptions. In reality, a greater spread of wealth to the poor would undoubtedly increase everybody's wealth. This is true regardless of whether the units of analysis are poor countries or poor sectors of the populations of rich countries. Such a raising of the standard of living of the poor would, of course, vastly increase consumption which, in turn, would increase the wealth of the producers. That would hardly qualify as an attack on capitalism. Unfortunately, such a restructuring of the distribution of wealth would inevitably require considerable time. However, the prevailing ethos in economic circles is oriented toward instant results. The performance of economic institutions is assessed on a quarterly basis and longer-range results are only rarely taken into consideration.

As long as the deleterious effects of the drives for power and wealth are obscured by erroneous perceptions and mistaken

definitions of situations and aggravated by a short-term time perspective, the prospects for preventing or reducing gross violations of human rights and genocides remain poor. The strongest hope seems to lie in a spreading of popular protests to such a level that they will be impossible to ignore – at least in countries with a commitment to democracy.



Montreal Institute For Genocide and Human Rights Studies  
Concordia University  
1455 De Maisonneuve Blvd. West  
Montreal, Quebec, H3G 1M8 Canada  
Tel.: (514) 848-2424 ext 5729 or 2404  
Fax: (514) 848-4538