

## PRECURSORS OF GENOCIDE - A RESEARCH AGENDA

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After years of studying comparative genocide it seems time to take stock. Have I really learned anything? Of course, I have learned a great deal. But have I learned anything about the situations and processes that may lead to genocide and therefore may lead to ways of prevention? I hope so.

There is no point in pretending that I have found a causal connection. The best that I have to offer so far is a list of variables that may lead to conflicts that in extreme cases can escalate to gross violations of human rights and to genocide. Each of these variables can be observed in all societies. They are: ideologies, state formation, population policies, and poverty. None of these four factors produce genocides, either singly or in combination. In that sense they do not predict when or where the next genocide will occur. However, I shall hypothesize that genocides are most likely to occur when these variables take on negative values. In discussing these four factors or variables I shall make no effort to survey the relevant literature for each one. Not only would this divert attention from the argument that I am about to present, but it is also beyond the scope of this paper because these bodies of literature are quite enormous. I am presenting this research agenda in the hope that students of comparative genocide will join me in exploring this agenda. Some of the assertions I am about to make have the status of conventional wisdom; others are quite controversial and require closer examination. It should therefore be obvious that the proposed task is quite beyond any one individual, especially one of my advancing age.

There is much debate these days about so-called sustainable development. That term presumably refers to development that, rather than producing temporary improvements, results in cumulative and permanent changes. In actual practice one ought to distinguish between short-range and long-range development. Short-range actions usually involve intervention by the United Nations and/or regional coalitions of NGOs that are focused on immediate improvements in social, economic and political scenarios. They tend to be motivated by humanitarian goals moderated by concerns for financial and trade interests. Long-range development tends to be a much more complicated matter that involves developments in state formation, moderation of individual and collective poverty, reduction of the power of fundamentalist ideologies, and an explicit program to deal with population dynamics. To the extent that such programs of long-range development are successful they are most likely to decrease the more extreme forms of conflict that lead to gross violations of human rights and genocides.

Ideologies, whether based on ethnicity, nation, race, or religion, are a part of the culture of all peoples. In their normal manifestations they present no danger to the functioning of civil society. While it is desirable to organize civil society on the basis of separation of church and state, such separation is not possible for the other ideologies because they often tend to lie at the core of the state's political organization. But even the separation of church and state is obviously not a realistic option in many contemporary countries. Any of these ideologies, whatever their content, can become a threat to peaceful community relations when they take on certain fundamentalist and extremist forms. In those cases their adherents will believe that they are acting on instructions from a higher authority and that this authority legitimates their actions – actions that are intended to implement their view of the perfect society.

So far, the process from ideology to violence is simple and straight forward. The difficulties arise in explaining the perpetrators' relations to their victims. When these relations are mediated by technology it is possible to explain the perpetrators behaviour in terms of the physical distance from the victims. This physical distance may remove the possibility of personal contact and the human empathy that such contact might evoke. What is much more difficult to explain is the perpetrators' behaviour when the technology employed is comparatively primitive and the physical distance from their victims is minimal. In spite of the attempts by some psychological theories, it is difficult to understand how people who have lived peacefully in the same communities, have worked together, and have intermarried, can suddenly kill in the most brutal way. (Among the many cases that might be cited the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda are only the most recent ones.) That ability to engage in extreme brutality without ethical hesitations has often been observed among criminal sociopaths who therefore were recruited by some perpetrators (Nazi Germany and Turkey are the best-known examples.). But this does not help to explain how otherwise perfectly normal people can engage in such behaviour. Any research into this area will have to start by asking whether the perpetrators were motivated by conviction, whether they were carried along by a mob incited by agents provocateurs, or whether they acted under some bureaucratic compulsion.

State formation, a rather complicated process that seems to occur only over extended time periods, is an essential ingredient in the prevention of gross human rights violations. Some recent studies have found that such violations are not committed by democracies. This rather comforting finding is produced by citizens of democracies who conveniently ignore the gross human rights violations, massacres, and genocides that have been perpetrated or abetted by leading democratic countries. One might argue that their finding is a contradiction in terms rather than a finding because a country that engages in genocide can hardly qualify as a true democracy, i.e.: one ruled with the consent of the governed. Thus, these studies also suffer from an unexamined view of what constitutes a democracy and from their failure to explain how a democracy can turn into an autocracy that does commit gross human rights violations. Leaving such considerations aside, it is certainly true by definition that a well-established democracy does not commit genocide without first undergoing a fundamental restructuring to shed its democratic features. Western countries and NGOs have made the encouragement of democratization a central part of their aid to and support of developing countries. However, this does not address the possibility of a non-democratic or one-party state opposing genocide and supporting human rights. Whatever the nature of the state, in order to ensure the prevention of violence it needs to have developed stable institutional forms in a number of areas. These must include a fair legal system, clear rules of citizenship, a law of contract, a civil service, a fair system of taxation, a disciplined army and police force, control over bribery and corruption, etc. It is quite possible for such a state to have developed on the basis of an ideology that does not subscribe to Western notions of the rights of the individual, that considers the declaration on human rights quite irrelevant, and that circumscribes individual freedoms in accordance with the restrictions mandated by their ideology. Such states are often based on value systems that give priority to the well-being of the collectivity and consider the individual less important. Whatever the prevailing value system, a state must be able to have formed and to maintain a reliable institutional infra-structure in order to manage the resolution of inevitable conflicts without engendering undue violence.

Population dynamics are a crucial component among the precursors of genocide although they are not often discussed in that context. There are many reasons for this, but the most important one is that all states have a population policy (either stated or implicit) without having an effective way of implementing it. In the present context the most important aspects of a population are its density and its birth rate. Density is not an absolute number, but rather the ratio of people to an area that can support them. Thus, for example, in countries like Burundi and Rwanda that are primarily agricultural the average holding available for a family is hardly large enough to provide sufficient food for them. Such situations lead to competition for scarce resources and conflict.

The birth rate presents a particularly frustrating conundrum in this context: while much is understood about its fluctuations, very little is known about how the state can influence it. Another way of putting this is to say that the reasons women have children have very little to do with the reasons the state has for its population policy. This conundrum is well illustrated by France (among others) which has failed to reverse its falling birth rate by supporting larger families and has to maintain its population size by a liberal immigration policy. The opposite problem is illustrated by China (among others) which has failed to arrest its population growth by legislating family size and family planning and tries to stem the growth of its population by encouraging and supporting migration. In both cases, the policy problem is clear enough. In countries where the birth rate falls below the replacement level, policy makers want to avoid a declining population by immigration which may lead to conflicts. In countries where the birth rate rises significantly above the replacement level, policy makers want to avoid the increasing pressure on natural resources that eventually can lead to food shortages and to starvation. Population density and continued population growth will inevitably lead to competition for scarce resources that will inevitably lead to conflict. Thus, an effective population policy is essential even without taking into consideration the related issues of environmental degradation, industrialized agriculture, and excessive consumption of resources.

Poverty is conceived here to include both individual and collective indebtedness, lack of adequate living standards, and extreme inequality in the distribution of available wealth. In developed countries the increasing gap between the rich and the poor produces an underclass that becomes more hostile to the state as lack of food and lack of hope increase. They eventually become a source of conflict that may increasingly tend toward the use of violence when the state is perceived as unsympathetic. In developing countries the same lack of food and lack of hope is produced by the exploitation of their resources by multinational corporations and by the application of mistaken theories of development -- both of which come from outside the state. After the end of World War II foreign aid and technical assistance were based on economic theories which assumed that development and industrialization in the Third World would recapitulate the steps observed in the First World. When that proved not to be the case, new theories prescribed that the same rules governed the management of monetary and trade policies in all states and that the so-called free market was a self-correcting mechanism that worked best when freed of all governmental constraints. What these theories take for granted is that one model fits all and that the enormous range of situations and conditions in the various regions of the world are equally amenable to the same solutions. One might think that even a cursory inspection of the great differences from one country to another would caution against such oversimplification. One might also observe that the theoretical assumptions are not confirmed by actual observations. Lately, even the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have been re-examining these assumptions and that theory because their enforced application as part of their lending policy seems to have produced increasing poverty and conflict. What is so striking about such economic theories is that they seem to ignore and even undermine the basic character of a capitalist system. Instead of creating wealth through the production of goods and services, the neo-capitalism of the late



twentieth century produces wealth through the manipulation of money. The free market turns out to give free reign to uninhibited greed rather than producing the benefits expected from it. What is striking about this phenomenon is that this greed leads to a kind of robber baron exploitation that produces instant wealth, but defeats the larger aim of capitalism. This instant wealth is focused on showing profitability in the current quarter without regard for results in subsequent quarters. Thus, merging enterprises and laying off employees may produce an immediate result, but is obviously not repeatable over a longer time span. It should be self-evident that increasing the income of the poor would enormously increase their consumption of goods and services. Henry Ford said long ago that he increased the pay of his workers because otherwise they could not afford to buy his cars. It is obvious that his enterprise flourished in spite of his paying the highest wages at that time.

This is not the place to explore how this kind of capitalism based on enlightened self interest may be implemented. Neither is it the place for exploring the ethical imperatives that would mandate the alleviation of poverty. Instead, the argument will be made that the reduction of poverty would lead to a reduction in ideological extremism, a more rapid state formation, a decrease in population growth, and their associated risks of escalating violence. Therefore, this essay is limited to indicating how the reduction of poverty would contribute to the amelioration of those sources of conflict that in their extreme forms can lead to massacres and genocides.

Let us imagine an state of affairs where everyone is assured of a modest income that permits a standard of living that provides adequately for food, clothing, and shelter. This is not an argument for socialism because it has proven incapable of increasing wealth in those cases where it has been tried. Neither is it an argument for disenfranchising the rich because a distribution of their wealth would not in the long run significantly improve the standard of living of the poor. Finally, it is also not an argument for a welfare state because the proposed raising of the standard of living of the poor is to be accomplished by providing employment at decent wages rather by welfare payments. The implementation of this proposal, in addition to somewhat reducing the degree of inequality in society, would almost certainly initiate several processes. Consumption of goods and services would dramatically increase; the nutritional and medical health of the population would increase; support for a state based on the rule of law would increase; interest in the more extreme forms of ideologies would wane; the revenues of the providers of goods and services would grow; the state budget would benefit through increased taxation revenues; crimes would decrease, especially those against property; people would hope to improve their situation, but especially that of their children; providing a better future for their children will cause them to invest in education and occupational training; in order to implement these plans and hopes they will reduce the number of their children; this, in turn, would reduce the rate of population growth; and having an investment in the future, people are more likely to resolve their conflict by peaceful means.

In conclusion, all of these anticipated effects are not an exercise in futurology. They can all be documented by research finding derived from areas where such effects have already occurred. This essay is not the place for detailed examination and verification of such studies. Neither is it the place to spell out in detail how these obviously desirable conditions may be implemented. Suffice it to conclude by saying that there is no simple recipe for such implementation; instead, a variety of recipes must be derived from a detailed study of the particular situation in each country.



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