Genocide as Social Practice

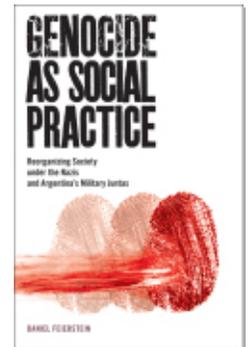Daniel Feierstein, Douglas Andrew Town, Alexander Laban Hinton

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Introduction

Bridging the Gap between Two Genocides

The starting point for this book arose from my intuition two decades ago that the policies pursued by the Argentine military dictatorship against political opponents and dissidents between 1976 and 1983 had important similarities to those pursued by the Third Reich, particularly before but even during World War II, despite the huge differences in the number of victims and historical contexts. The Nazis had resorted to ruthless methods not only to stifle dissent but—more importantly—to reorganize German society into a *Volksgemeinschaft*, or people's community, in which racial solidarity would supposedly replace class struggle. It was no coincidence that after seizing power in 1976, the Argentine military described its own program of forced disappearances, torture, and murder as a "Process of National Reorganization" aimed at remodeling society along "Western and Christian" lines.

This realization led me to explore an important but relatively neglected aspect of genocidal processes, namely, the ways in which annihilation has been used to destroy and reorganize social relations. In the pages that follow, I will encourage you to consider genocide not only as a latent potential of modernity but as a specific technology of power. A technology of power is a form of social engineering that creates, destroys, or reorganizes relationships within a given society. It influences the ways in which different social groups construct their identity, the identity of others, and the otherness of the Other, thus shaping the way that groups can relate to themselves and to one another. This does not mean that genocide's only function is to reorganize social relations or that societies can only be reorganized through genocide. It does mean, however, that genocide and social reorganization are closely connected. This connection is neither an obvious nor a necessary one, but it has been a constant of genocidal social practices in the second half of the twentieth century.

Does this mean that the Argentine repression should be considered an instance of "genocide" on the same level as the Nazi extermination? I do not intend to gloss over the fact that the magnitude and impact of these events as well as the political ends pursued by the perpetrators were very different. On the contrary, these differences will be explored in considerable detail in the chapters to follow. On the other hand, I have not chosen these two examples simply to create a convenient chronological narrative. The deeper purpose of this book is to analyze in detail the annihilation of human communities—an approach so far almost neglected in genocide studies. The reality of genocide as a social practice—a mechanism capable of destroying and reorganizing the fabric of entire societies—will become clearer as we trace the genesis of the Argentine repression through the counterinsurgency battles of the 1950s and 1960s in Indochina, Algeria, and Vietnam.

Of course, mass killings are an age-old phenomenon. However, the term "genocide" was first created by Raphael Lemkin in 1944 and enshrined as a legal term in the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (CPPCG).[1] Since then, many attempts have been made to understand genocide, including studies in fields as diverse as law, history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, communication theory, philosophy, theology, and ethics, to name just a few.[2] Most early studies of genocide focused on the annihilation of entire populations by the Nazis, including the murder of over six million European Jews, which had come as a profound moral and political shock to the West. Comparative studies of genocide did not appear until the late 1970s.[3] Most comparative studies have been attempts to understand Nazism against the background of earlier or later events and, through a process of comparison and contrast, to explain the meaning or meaninglessness—the rationality or irrationality—of genocidal social practices in the modern age.

Interpretations have varied according to historical periods and personal ideologies. Some authors have seen genocidal social practices as an isolated outbreak of savagery on the otherwise upward march of civilization. Daniel Goldhagen, for example, claims in *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996) that anti-Semitism was deeply embedded not only in the society of Nazi Germany but in German culture itself. Others, however, see genocide as a consequence of modernity. This idea was first put forward in the early 1930s by Walter Benjamin, a member of the Frankfurt School of social theory, who witnessed the rise to power of the Nazis. It is also to be found in the early work of Theodor Adorno, another member of the Frankfurt School and one of the few authors to write about genocide during and immediately after the Second World War. Similarly, scholars such as Zygmunt Bauman have seen genocide as a latent possibility within all modern civilized societies.

Nevertheless, these thinkers and their followers have all attempted in different ways to describe genocidal social processes within a historical narrative.

As the philosopher of history Hayden White has pointed out, historians are forced to use narrative and rhetorical strategies to represent the past. Indeed, what he calls the "poetics of history" includes not only the literary genres (romance, tragedy, comedy, satire) that historians use to weave their stories into a complete history, but also different types of argument (formist, mechanistic, organicist, contextualist) and ideology (anarchist, radical, conservative, liberal). According to Hayden White, these literary, argumentative, and ideological dimensions are all closely interrelated.[4]

Throughout this book we will examine various comparative studies of genocidal processes, most of which have been published at various moments in the field of genocide studies in English, French, or Spanish. For the time being, I will take just three studies in order to illustrate what Hayden White calls the "ideological implications" of discursive frames and the discursive consequences of selecting different historical examples. By looking briefly at narratives structured along different lines, the reader may also recognize what makes *Genocide as Social Practice* different from other accounts.

The first of these studies is by one of the best-known authors in comparative genocide studies, the U.S.-Armenian genocide scholar Vahakn Dadrian. Dadrian has argued in several works that it is both possible and desirable to compare the genocide of the Armenian and Jewish peoples. Even though he does not say so explicitly, his goals are as much political as academic. His work attempts to show that the genocide of the Armenian people—still denied by the Turkish state after nearly a century—was a social event comparable in its magnitude, severity, and consequences to the genocide of the Jewish people under Nazism.

Dadrian's interest in the Holocaust, however, is not only driven by his political agenda. His comparative work has traced lines of convergence and divergence between the Jewish and the Armenian genocides. Similarities include the minority status of both peoples and their history of persecution; their vulnerability in the territories where they lived; the presence of the necessary social conditions and structures for their annihilation; and the crucial roles played by political parties—the German National Socialist party and the Ittihad party of the Young Turks—among other factors.

Since the early 1970s, recognition for the Armenian genocide has grown, and Dadrian's views are now supported by a growing number of academics and politicians. By the late 1990s, his work had become accepted into the hegemonic academic "mainstream" of genocide studies, so much so that he decided to add another case to his comparative analysis, namely the 1994 Rwandan genocide.[5] In his article "Patterns of Twentieth-Century Genocides: The Armenian, Jewish, and Rwandan Cases" (2004), Dadrian traces a thread through three genocidal processes in which the victims were chosen because of their "ethnicity," even though this is a questionable concept in the case of Rwanda, where tensions

between Hutus and Tutsis—groups that shared the same language, culture, and religion—were created by Belgian colonialism in the twentieth century.[6]

Dadrian himself was probably not aware that his choice of cases to exemplify the social practices of genocide in the twentieth century and his emphasis on ethnic and religious markers of "otherness" among the victims have narrative, ideological, and argumentative implications that—as suggested by Hayden White—are closely interconnected. Although Dadrian does not focus exclusively on ethnicity, the implicit argument is that of mainstream genocide studies, namely, that genocide is rooted in ethnic hatred. The ideological implication is that—with the exception of Germany—so-called first world countries where most mainstream genocide scholars live are blameless. The narrative dimension of Dadrian's 35-page article is perhaps more difficult to determine; but an emphasis on ethnic hatred implies a focus on horror and atrocities rather than rational planning for political ends.

The second of these studies is by Ben Kiernan, director of the Genocide Studies Program at Yale University. Kiernan is noted for his careful documentation of the genocide in Cambodia in the 1970s. Like Dadrian, Kiernan began by specializing in a particular instance of genocide before moving on to comparative studies. His aim has been to situate the Cambodian massacres within a historical sequence of mass killings, including of course the most emblematic case of the twentieth century: the Holocaust.[7]

Unlike Dadrian, however, Kiernan had to come to terms with the fact that the Cambodian genocide was carried out essentially for political reasons, while the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the United Nations in 1948 expressly excludes crimes against political groups from its definition of genocide. Accordingly, Kiernan begins his study, "Twentieth-Century Genocide: Underlying Ideological Themes from Armenia to East Timor," published in 2003, with the Armenian genocide and the Nazi Holocaust, but—unlike Dadrian—he compares these not with Rwanda but with three cases where the political-ideological nature of genocide is obvious: Cambodia, where state-sponsored killing was carried out in the name of socialism; Indonesia, which suffered a vast anti-Communist purge in the mid-1960s; and East Timor, where a dispute over self-determination with the colonial power, Portugal, was followed by 25 years of brutal Indonesian military occupation.[8]

After analyzing the discourses surrounding these different genocides, Kiernan concludes that racism is always used to construct the "enemy." However, Kiernan argues that racism should be construed in a broad sense as focusing on ethnic, religious, or political affiliations. In fact, racist ideology gives meaning to the processes of stigmatization and subsequent annihilation, regardless of the actual concepts used to describe and identify the enemy in any specific case. Kiernan also claims that "territorial expansion" plays a

fundamental role in genocidal states, as do various ways of "idealizing" a peasant population that is supposedly "less civilized" and, therefore, less exposed to the "evils of urban life," both material and moral.

In short, Kiernan and Dadrian make different assumptions about causation, and these assumptions are, to some extent, implicit in their choice of examples. Thus, Dadrian tends to emphasize ethnic hatred while Kiernan emphasizes ideological factors. This is true even when they are discussing the same genocides—the Armenian Massacres and the Nazi Holocaust. Although these are mostly differences in emphasis rather than of substance, they have the potential to create different and potentially contradictory explanations of genocidal social practices.

The third and last of these comparative studies is by Enzo Traverso, an Italian historian, who proposes an interesting and unorthodox historical sequence that takes the Holocaust as its endpoint rather than its starting point. In his book *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (2003), Traverso traces the legacy of European violence that created Nazism, especially genocides committed under European colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He thus examines the German annihilation of the Herero and Nama peoples of Namibia at the beginning of the twentieth century and Mussolini's use of poison gas against tribesmen during the Italian conquest of Abyssinia in 1935, which Henry Huttenbach has seen as a precursor of the Nazi gas chambers.[9]

On the other hand, Traverso rejects elsewhere the notion of common totalitarian threads between Nazism and Stalinism. This is in sharp contrast to the approach of conservative historian Ernst Nolte, who sees Nazism as a "European" response to the "Bolshevik terror" from Asia.[10] In Traverso's view, Nazi genocidal policy is linked to the legacy of colonialism through the concepts of "total war" and "conquest." Traverso shows that the Nazi atrocities that so shocked European public opinion after the Second World War had been committed without causing much moral concern among Nazis.

We could continue citing studies to show how comparisons of different historical events can give rise to different explanations of genocide—but I think the point is clear.[11] The problem in this book is to explain the connections between Nazism and the annihilation practices developed under the National Security Doctrine of the Cold War period and implemented in Argentina between 1974 and 1983. What sort of narrative is needed to link these two events via what Barbara Harff has called "post-colonial genocide" of the second half of the twentieth century?[12]

Dadrian, Kiernan, and Traverso have identified, respectively, the ethnic, ideological, and colonial roots of Nazi racism and genocide. It is my contention that the counterinsurgency wars of the 1950s and 1960s and, to a much larger extent, the development of the National Security Doctrine in many countries

of Latin America may help to clarify the political idiosyncrasies of Nazism. These include the Nazis' construction of the prototypical victim—the Jewish Bolshevik—and their new diagram of power in which the annihilation of certain populations and the use of concentration camps were of fundamental importance.[13]

Historians who focus on the ethnic racism of Nazi Germany have tended to ignore the Nazi stereotype of the Jewish Bolshevik. The few historians that have tried to account for it have tended to subordinate the Nazis' ethnic racism to their ideological struggle against communism.[14] However, the figure of Jewish Bolshevik was an unusual concept which merged the political and ethnocultural into a unitary image. The Jewish Bolshevik was portrayed as the prototypical enemy of Western civilization. The need to defend the West—or more exactly "Western Christian" values—would be invoked again much more explicitly as a justification for genocide in Argentina.

There is another problem with attempts to understand the Nazis' goals in purely ethnic or ideological terms. They fail to explain why the ruling classes in Germany and much of Europe favored Hitler—at least until the outbreak of World War II. Nor do they explain how German society came to be so totally "reorganized" by the Nazis, particularly between 1933 and 1938 and again as the Third Reich collapsed in late 1944 and 1945. In focusing on the death camps in which Jewish and Roma communities were exterminated between 1942 and 1945, historians have tended to downplay the importance of the concentration camp system. And yet the first camps were opened almost as soon as the Nazis came to power in 1933 and remained a part of everyday life in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe until the collapse of the regime in 1945. There has been no adequate account so far of the role played by concentration camps as stepping-stones to genocide or the range of victims imprisoned or murdered in them during the "reorganization" of German society and the Reich's military expansion eastward.[15]

This book is organized along two main lines. Its analytical framework seeks to understand the deliberate annihilation of human groups as a distinctive form of social engineering. In other words, processes of mass destruction in contemporary history are seen not as isolated occurrences, but as instances of a technology of power whose causes, effects, and specific consequences can be identified and described. At the same time, the book's historical or narrative framework aims to support this claim by exploring two annihilation processes in detail: the Nazi genocide, which began with different policies for different groups and evolved gradually between 1933 and 1945; and the state-sponsored repression in Argentina between 1974 and 1983.[16] The plan of the book is as follows.

Chapter 1 examines the legal, historical, sociological, and philosophical uses of the term "genocide" and asks to what extent the concept is applicable to

the events in Argentina between 1974 and 1983. It also explains the concept of "genocide as a social practice" and the use of genocide as a technology of power.

Chapter 2 proposes a new classification of the social practices of genocide. This classification makes the destruction and reorganization of social relations more visible by establishing continuity between the "reorganizing genocide" first practiced by the Nazis and its more complex version—complex in terms of the symbolic and material closure of social relationships—later applied in Argentina.

Chapter 3 examines the effectiveness of genocidal social practices and technologies of power and their relationship with the unresolved contradictions of modernity. It also considers factors that facilitate the onset of genocide and that make it a meaningful choice for the perpetrators.

Chapters 4 to 8 place the Nazi and the Argentine genocides in their historical context and critically assess the different ways these events have been described in various disciplines. This earlier work is examined for possible clues to understanding genocide as a technology of power.

Chapter 9 uses testimonies of survivors to analyze the primary technological apparatus of the Nazi and the Argentine genocides—the concentration camp. I will contend that these camps were designed not only to punish individual prisoners but also to terrorize the wider population from which the inmates of the camps were drawn.

Finally, chapter 10 raises questions about the continuing relevance of genocidal social practices, about genocide's role in the development of modernity, and about how to construct a political culture capable of confronting and resisting these trends.

The objectives of any publication are shaped by where and when it is written. Dadrian, Kiernan, and Traverso write from the center of world politics and culture in Europe or the United States. On the other hand, I am writing from the periphery in Latin America.[17] I am aware as an Argentine Jewish historian and sociologist that my choice of narrative strategy is as subjective and politically motivated as any other. Indeed, my childhood in an Argentina crisscrossed by unmarked Ford Falcons transporting prisoners to concentration camps and my heritage as a descendant of a Jewish family who emigrated from Poland before the Nazi invasion haunt these pages and are never far below their surface. Having said that and without claiming that my approach is better or more comprehensive than any other, I do believe it produces a legitimate picture of the social practices of genocide during the second half of the twentieth century.

In any case, it is difficult in Argentina to speak about the Nazi genocide without referring at some point to our own recent history. This book grew out of an intuition about two historical events that have shaped my life. Of course, intuitive interpretations are of little value unless supported by evidence, and

one of the main concerns of this book is to show that this path—this relationship of events—is valid.

It is for the reader to judge whether this intuition has been justified by the concepts it has generated—in particular, the notion of genocidal social practices as a technology of power and a means of reorganizing relationships within a given society.