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## Genocide as Social Practice

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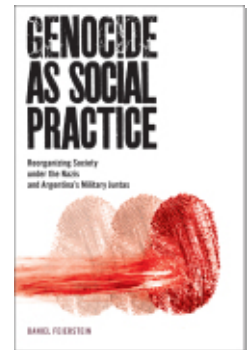
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## Reconciling the Contradictions of Modernity

### Equality, Sovereignty, Autonomy, and Genocidal Social Practices

Ulla bar Koshev was sought by the [Roman] government. He fled to Lod, to the house of Rabi Joshua ben Levi. [Roman troops] came and surrounded the town. They said: If you do not hand him over we will destroy the town. R. Joshua ben Levi went up to him [Ulla], persuaded him [to submit], and handed him over. The prophet Elijah, of blessed memory, had been accustomed to reveal himself to R. Joshua ben Levi; but he stopped visiting him. R. Joshua fasted many fasts and Elijah appeared again. [In answer to why he had stayed away, Elijah said:] Shall I reveal myself to betrayers? He replied: But have I not acted upon a rabbinic teaching? Elijah replied: Is this a teaching for pious men?

—Jerusalem Talmud (Terumot 8:4)

In recent years a growing body of literature across various disciplines has been concerned with the concept of modernity. Writers in areas as diverse as law, history, sociology, philosophy, aesthetics, and design now routinely use it—often in quite different and even contradictory ways. For the purposes of this discussion, modernity means a power system together with a set of specific practices (whose precise details vary according to historical context) for destroying and reconstructing social relations. However, even in this restricted sense, modernity is still a broad enough notion to have different (and even contradictory) manifestations. These practices, or “diagrams of power,” as Michel Foucault calls them (see chapter 1), act together as a “technology of power” to construct hegemony—in other words, to establish the dominance of one social group over another. They can be used not only to control populations but to reconstruct their very identity.

This chapter starts from Foucault's analysis of the theoretical and political features of the modern power system.<sup>1</sup> I use this perspective to explore the disturbing notion that genocidal social practices have arisen during the modern period as a part of a new technology of power. Thus, although such practices are not inevitable, they are always latent in modernity—what Zygmunt Bauman calls a “logical possibility.”<sup>2</sup> We will also examine some of the contradictions that arose as modernity became consolidated as a system of power and the role that genocidal social practices have played in attempting to solve these contradictions.

Broadly speaking, the emergence of modernity as the hegemonic system of power gave rise almost immediately to a series of contradictions around three main issues: *equality*, *sovereignty*, and *autonomy*. These issues reflected structural changes in the ways Europeans experienced and represented the world (and therefore themselves) during the transition from feudalism to capitalism in the eighteenth century, while the contradictions resulted from a mismatch between the explicit discourse of the new system of power and the way power was exercised in practice. In time, these contradictions began to have dysfunctional or, at least, unexpected effects that threatened to undermine the legitimacy, consensus, and rationality of the system itself. It was the need to reconcile these contradictions that caused the technology of power to evolve.

Here I will consider contradictions related to all three of the main issues. However, I will focus mostly on the question of autonomy as it is more directly connected with the role of genocidal social practices within the power structures of the modern world.

## The Contradictions of Modernity

### *The Issue of Equality*

From the last quarter of the eighteenth century onward, the bourgeoisie competed with the nobility for power within the emerging nation-states of Europe. Traditionally, feudalism and Christianity had divided society into three castes or “estates”—nobility, clergy, and commoners—each with different duties and privileges. Later, thinkers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, and Karl Marx developed the ideas of earlier liberals such as Locke and Montesquieu in an effort to legitimize the aspirations of the rising middle classes by giving legal and symbolic status to the notion of human equality.

The notion that all men were citizens with rights (rather than privileges that could be taken away by an absolute monarch) rested on the assumption that all men were equal (at least symbolically, if not economically). However, although the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 declared fundamental rights, not only for French citizens but for “all men without exception,” it did not recognize women or slaves as citizens. Thus, in a sense,

the declaration and other works that followed subverted the possibility of social empowerment and greater autonomy in social relationships.

In *The Social Contract* (1762) the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously noted that “man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”<sup>3</sup> As the notion of equality became more widely accepted in Europe after the American and French revolutions, philosophers also became increasingly interested in explaining the causes of human inequality. Rousseau himself believed that individual liberty should be subordinated to the “general will” of the community. However, he considered that human beings do not have the intellectual capabilities to rationalize the general good, and so the “general will” is impossible to determine. However the Scottish social philosopher and economist Adam Smith (1723–1790) believed that the best way to benefit society as a whole is by acting in accordance with one’s own self-interest. Smith accordingly advocated self-regulating markets free from state intervention. Adam Smith explained differences in wealth or power in terms of the accumulated work of previous generations. This helped in understanding how inequalities had arisen, but it could not justify the policies of inequality that continued to be applied by modern nation-states. How then could discriminatory state policies be justified?

One attempt to resolve the contradiction between “natural equality” and actual inequality was the doctrine of racism. This questioned the notion of natural equality and tried to set limits on citizenship. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), for example, stated in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764) that “the Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling . . . even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.”<sup>4</sup> In line with other thinkers of the time, Kant held that Adam and Eve had been Caucasian and that other races had developed because of a degeneration caused by environmental factors, such as climate and poor food.<sup>5</sup> Kant argued elsewhere that we cannot simply take the precepts of natural law from our hearts. The “good use of reason” was also required.

The nineteenth century, however, gave rise to a more radical form of racism. Although he grew up in an aristocratic, Catholic milieu among people who despised the ideals of the French Revolution, Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau (1816–1882) openly challenged the Judeo-Christian doctrine that all human beings shared common ancestors in Adam and Eve. It is in his book *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853–1855) where Gobineau developed his theory of the Aryan master race.

Meanwhile, the English biologist, philosopher, and sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was busy elaborating a developmental theory of species and race, which he published in 1855 in his *Principles of Psychology*. It was

Spencer who coined the expression “survival of the fittest” to explain Darwin’s concept of natural selection, and it became the cornerstone of Social Darwinism, a social theory that power and wealth of individuals and even whole nations is a consequence of their genetic endowment.

The German physician Gerhard Wagner (1888–1939) pushed this cynical theory to its logical conclusion during the Nazi era. Dr. Wagner was the leader of the National Socialist German Physicians’ Federation (NSDÄB) when Hitler came to power and became leader of the Reich Physicians’ Chamber in 1935. On September 12, 1935, Wagner announced in a speech that the Nazis would soon introduce a “law for the protection of German blood” preventing mixed marriages between Jews and “Aryans.” This is how he justified his proposal:

The doctrine of equality also denied racial boundaries and especially in the case of Europe the boundaries between Europeans and Jews. The result has been a growing mixture with Jewish blood, completely foreign to us. This growing illegitimacy was bound to bring direct consequences . . . because the special racial characteristics of the Jewish people . . . made such a mixture extremely harmful. By contrast, National Socialism has begun to recognize once again that the foundation of all cultural life is the natural and God-given inequality of men and it draws the necessary conclusions from this. Politically, the guiding idea is to promote a hierarchy based on the inherently different value of different individuals; as a consequence of this, responsibility in all areas has once again become possible. Biologically speaking, this means fighting racial degeneration in order to favor the able-bodied and healthy over the unfit as well as rejecting mixed blood or the influence of any alien race.<sup>6</sup>

Although Gerhard Wagner was mainly concerned with eradicating “life unworthy of life” by sterilizing the mentally handicapped and preventing “the infiltration of Jewish blood into the German national body,”<sup>7</sup> the Nazis quickly expanded this definition to include Gypsies, Slavs, Blacks, American Indians, tribal groups, colonized peoples, “mulattos,” Arabs, Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, political dissidents, and the homeless, among others. Thus, scientific racism—whether based on the earlier degeneration theories or later evolutionary theories—undermined one of the most enlightened and fertile concepts of the modern age: the notion of natural equality.

Once a belief in racial hierarchy had become politically respectable, it was a short step from positive eugenics—for example, giving awards to mothers of Aryan children and discouraging contact with “inferior races”—to negative eugenics through forced sterilization and, later, mass annihilation.<sup>8</sup> However, although the Nazis took such policies to extremes, other countries shared these ideas. Racial segregation was widespread in the United States until the 1960s; as early as 1924, the State of Virginia passed laws criminalizing marriages

between “whites” and “coloreds” and introducing forced sterilization of “mental deficients” and the “mentally ill.” In some European colonies, racist theories led to the extensive exploitation and murder of unequal Others.<sup>9</sup>

### The Question of Sovereignty

Although the term “sovereignty” commonly refers to independence and self-government, here it is used in the more literal sense of the power or right of a sovereign to rule. According to Foucault, one of the main ways of disciplining populations in the modern world is through biopower—in other words, “technologies of domination [that] act essentially on the body, and classify and objectify individuals.”<sup>10</sup> Foucault argues that it is “the emergence of biopower that inscribes [racism] in the mechanisms of the State . . . as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States.”<sup>11</sup>

The feudal technology of power was based on the sovereign’s right to “kill or let live.” In accordance with the doctrine known as the divine right of kings, feudal kings derived their right to rule directly from God and were not accountable to their subjects. But the modern need to justify power rationally gave rise to a new technology based on the protection of life rather than the threat of death. Rulers were expected to improve the quality of life of their citizens through improved public health, education, and justice in return for which the population surrendered a good deal of its freedom. But this in turn gave rise to a new problem: how to justify the “need” to kill when the state was, almost by definition, expected to guarantee life?

The solution was as follows. In the seventeenth century the term “body politick” described a politically organized group of people under a single government. In the modern era, this medical metaphor was extended to include the notions of “normal” and “pathological” groups of people, thus undermining the doctrine of natural equality and replacing it with notions of social hygiene derived from scientific racism: the pathological must be eradicated to defend the normal. Murder, genocide, and extermination were thus justified as ways to preserve the human species from physical and mental degeneration, and the legitimacy of state murder was reinstated under the formula “live or let die.”

Of course, it is impossible to discriminate against large numbers of people, let alone murder them, without causing moral outrage in a population brought up to believe in equality and the sanctity of life. But these moral barriers can usually be broken down by portraying others as a threat to public health and safety that requires drastic measures. This argument is commonly used by the perpetrators both during and after the event to justify looting, rape, torture, and murder.

A government that brands certain groups as parasites that cannot be taken on board its political and cultural project is on a fast track to genocide. The

genocidal process tends to move through predictable stages: first branding and harassing the victims, then isolating and weakening them before ultimately destroying them. And this process is experienced as “purification.” Branding distinguishes the “sick” from the “healthy”; harassment desensitizes the perpetrators, preparing them to commit worse atrocities; isolation destroys the victims’ social ties, making them dependent on their captors, who can then break their physical and psychological resistance more easily. Finally, the “social cancer” is removed as the victims are made to disappear, both physically and symbolically. The social body has been cured: biological images help the perpetrators to explain the inexplicable, not only to a hypothetical “moral other” but also to their private consciences.

The Nazis took the desire for political, genetic, and ethnic cleansing to extremes. Their attempt to create a racially pure society shook the very foundations of the post-Enlightenment technology of power. But the same logic was used until recently by Latin American governments to eliminate their political opponents and can be found today among those that exclude, harass, and murder African immigrants in France and Germany or street children in Brazil. Unfortunately, the outrage caused by the Nazi genocide does not seem to extend to these cases. All too often emphasis on the uniqueness of the Holocaust diverts attention from a technology of power that underpins many other modern states.

### **The Question of Autonomy**

As mentioned earlier, feudalism assigned people to different social classes according to their birth and gave each class different privileges and obligations. The modern concept of autonomy was necessary for building social relationships based on equality. The absolute right of the feudal monarch was replaced by the need for consensus based on a responsible use of reason. Within the modern liberal paradigm, Jean Jacques Rousseau is the most extreme exponent of the bourgeois liberal vision of equality and the “social contract” as a source of legitimate authority, while Immanuel Kant emphasizes the role of reason in human action and human autonomy as a goal to be achieved.

I have suggested how discriminatory social and economic policies can be legitimated by a hierarchical and naturalist vision of social reality. But this only happens when such a vision is imposed on us by others or, as Kant put it, “heteronomously.” The medieval Christian Church exercised a tight control over the ways the world could be understood, including the natural world. Because the Church defended a closed system of knowledge in which phenomena had allegorical, metaphysical, and mystical meanings, any challenge to its authority could have disturbing philosophical, metaphysical, and even epistemological consequences. Galileo was imprisoned in 1637 for saying that the

Earth moves around the Sun because this implied that man was not the center of the universe.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was the Roman Catholic Church's perceived opposition to scientific research and technological innovation that drove liberals to secular thinking and "instrumental reason," even though the latter often reduced human beings to mere objects of manipulation.<sup>12</sup> Secular thinkers challenged the belief—born in the monasteries of Europe—that man is incapable of self-determination. However, equality and natural liberty implied a model of power as well as a commitment to individual freedom. In particular, the concept of *autonomy*, so necessary for modern scientific development, was to prove difficult to achieve in political terms.

Autonomy comes from the Greek *auto-* "self" *nomos*, "law" (i.e., "to give oneself one's own law") and refers to our capacity for self-determination. However, there have been many debates in modern philosophy as to what this actually means. Autonomy is often defined in opposition to natural (or eternal) law, which, according to Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), is a God-given knowledge woven into our nature that is meant to govern our lives.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, nineteenth-century liberals held that because individuals have different interests, laws should be based on a consensus about what will benefit the greatest number of people. Giving oneself one's own law thus means accepting that the law is a human construction, created freely through reason and *consent*. However, the destruction of traditional structures and truths that allowed the middle classes to achieve social and political power in the nineteenth century was to create serious problems for bourgeois governance in the twentieth century.

Both Rousseau and Kant considered that autonomy was threatened not only by the existing *social order* of nobility and Church but by the *natural order* of instincts and impulses. Thus, Rousseau argued that a citizen could only pursue his true interest by acting unselfishly even if this benefited somebody else in the short term, while Kant also pointed out the danger of basing decisions on irrational thoughts or obsessions. But the biggest problem was with the social contract itself. Although Rousseau and Kant argued for a state that was both rational and voluntary, they generally identified the *common good* with the postcontract status quo—the bourgeois state—which excluded most of the population from power. The property qualification for voters meant, for example, that in the so-called golden age of British parliamentary democracy of the mid-nineteenth century, only 7 percent of the population could vote.

In fact, the social contract on which the bourgeois state was supposedly founded was a metaphor. The original consensus—if such a thing had ever existed—had long since vanished and was simply an assumption, as Rousseau himself recognized in his *Discourse on Inequality* (1754). The bourgeois state itself was founded on deep social inequalities. Marx used the term "original accumulation of capital" to describe the role played by earlier colonial conquests and



plunder in the rise of industrial capitalism in Europe. This accumulation, which predated any social contract, had permitted both private ownership of the means of production and the existence of a mass of “free” laborers, that is, former agricultural laborers and hand-loom weavers now unemployed because of more efficient, capitalist methods of farming and textile making. As Marx noted, “freely negotiated” contracts between buyers and sellers of labor were “free” only in a formal sense since the buyer owned the factory, the raw materials, and the tools, while the seller, without work, faced starvation.

Even the miseries of unregulated capitalism, however, could not persuade people to give up the egalitarian and libertarian ideals of the French Revolution. Despite the restoration of the monarchy, the Church, and a landowning aristocracy in France and the Napoleonic Empire after Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo in 1815, the forces of conservatism would never recover the absolute authority they had enjoyed under feudalism. The new autonomy of the bourgeoisie created not only a new relationship with knowledge through science and technology but also new forms of political and social interaction that were gradually adopted by the disenfranchised working classes. These new forms of association were based on what the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980) called “reciprocal relationships between peers,” that is, the ability to see others as equals.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, autonomy did not just mean individual autonomy but autonomous social groups and organizations, such as trade unions and friendly societies, which were independent from the state.

More recently, the concept of autonomy has come under attack from several quarters. Feminists, for example, have pointed out that liberal notions of autonomy ignore the ways that individuals are situated in a community. Nevertheless, besides serving as an ideological linchpin of bourgeois societies, the concept of autonomy has also proved to have humanistic and revolutionary potential and is fundamental in explaining the revolutionary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Autonomy becomes an instrument of social control only when it is granted to some and denied to others. It is easy to understand why this occurs. If the principles of equality and freedom, in the form of autonomy, were taken to their logical conclusion, the modern liberal order would be overturned by the innumerable wretches of this world. By exercising their right to self-determination, these “outsiders” would impose a more egalitarian order and consensus. Hence we have the constant conflict between capitalism and democracy, which has given rise to all sorts of solutions from limited franchise democracy, through various paternalistic and dictatorial regimes, to fascism and the corporative state.

Society in the bourgeois state was organized through a network of disciplinary institutions. Prisons, factories, workhouses, asylums, hospitals, universities, schools, and even the family were all designed to keep the newly acquired

autonomy in check. Unless the population was constantly monitored and divided, autonomy tended to produce profound social unrest. Often, the disciplinary network was not enough to stem the tide of self-determination among different political, social, and ethnic groups. A clear example is the Revolutions of 1848, which spread to over fifty countries in Europe and Latin America and led to the abolition of serfdom in Austria and Hungary. But throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, tensions between authority and autonomy were never far below the surface.

### Reorganizing Genocide

Earlier we saw how racism had made it possible to solve the contradictions associated with equality and sovereignty. However, during the nineteenth century, the discourse of racism was still not able to confront the notion of autonomous social relations—a notion ultimately founded on *mutual respect*. It was not until the twentieth century that a new and horrifying solution to this problem emerged. Although it acquired its most extreme form under the Nazis, the use of *reorganizing genocide* as a tool of social engineering was to transform many modern states. The medical metaphors of ethnic cleansing and social hygiene were much more than a scientific justification of racist policies. They implied a profound destruction and reshaping of social relations.

Here, I should make clear that *reorganizing genocide* is different from other types of genocide (pre-state, constituent, colonial, postcolonial) in that it aims to destroy both materially and symbolically “the enemy within.” The Others to be exterminated are no longer barbarians or savages living in Europe’s colonies or in the frontier territories of the Americas—alien peoples construed as both exotic and inferior. Instead, it is our next-door neighbors—sometimes more educated and civilized than ourselves—who are stigmatized as part of a massive conspiracy to undermine the biological health of the species.

In other words, the Others have to be eliminated because they are *dangerous* but not necessarily because they are *inferior*—at least not in the sense of being backward. And, at the same time, reorganizing genocide does not simply target a social force or social group. It aims to eliminate a specific type of social relationship, namely, peer relationships. These relationships between equal partners are based on mutual solidarity and are independent of any externally imposed authority.<sup>15</sup>

Reorganizing genocide comes to the fore with the Nazis, although it plays a marginal role in some of Stalin’s policies. One controversial hypothesis (explored later in this book) is that the presence of such peer relationships was the common thread linking the often very different victim groups of Nazism. Once one starts to think in terms of relationships of autonomy and free association, a common identity among these victim groups begins to emerge.

The victims of Nazism were socially autonomous in various ways: culturally, politically, sexually, and in the workplace. Even though they came from very different cultural and social backgrounds, the inmates of the Nazi concentration camps (particularly during the period 1933–1938) all had one thing in common: they all behaved in ways that were “undisciplined” according to mainstream institutions and ideologies.

Once introduced by the Nazis, reorganizing genocide reappeared in various parts of the world throughout the rest of the century. Under the military dictatorship in Argentina after 1976, reorganizing genocide took an unusual and particularly dramatic form. As we will see in later chapters, the destruction of autonomous social relations remained an *implicit* goal of Nazi policy, one that can be deduced from the ways the Nazis construed their victims. However, the issue of autonomy becomes *explicit* under Argentina’s military dictatorship.

One official document clearly stating that people were being victimized for making use of their autonomy was a pamphlet distributed in 1977 by the Argentine Ministry of Education entitled “Subversion in the Field of Education.” This pointed out “the evident offensive in the area of children’s literature, the aim of which is to send a type of message starting from the child and which may enable him or her to become self-educated on the basis of liberty and choice.” The same official pamphlet states that “the intention of Marxist publishers is to offer books to accompany children in their struggle to delve into the world of things and the world of adults, to help them not to be afraid of freedom, to help them to love, to fight, to assert themselves, to defend their ego against the ego which parents and institutions try to impose upon them on many occasions, consciously or unconsciously victims of a system which has tried to make them in its own image.”<sup>16</sup>

This point of view was shared by General Acdel Vilas, who headed Operation Independence against the ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo, or People’s Revolutionary Army) in the province of Tucumán starting in December 1974. Although the ERP murdered dozens of soldiers, policemen, government officials, and executives of foreign companies during the early 1970s and “occupied” a third of the province of Tucumán in 1974, the use of state terror tactics by the army during Operation Independence was the first attempt in Argentina to carry out a reorganizing genocidal social practice. Here is how Vilas explained the meaning of the term “subversion”: “If the military allowed corrosive elements—psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, Freudians, etc.—to proliferate, stirring up people’s consciences and questioning the roots of the nation and the family, we would be defeated. . . . From then on every teacher or student that proved to be enrolled in the Marxist cause was considered subversive and, as could hardly be otherwise, he [*sic*] was subjected to the appropriate military sanctions.” There are dozens of similar statements on record, and many of them will be examined in detail in the chapters devoted to Argentina. Here I simply wish to point out

the explicit way in which autonomy was constructed as dangerous by the Argentine military. This hostility toward autonomy even led to a ban on the teaching of Cantor's set theory in university math classes since conservative Christian theologians saw it as challenging traditional views about the nature of God.

### ***Symbolic Enactments***

As mentioned in chapter 1, a key characteristic of reorganizing genocide is that the perpetrators seek to annihilate their enemies not just materially but also symbolically, forcing the survivors to deny their own identity. Their disappearance from memory is maintained by what I have called *symbolic enactments*—the ways through which postgenocide discourse distorts the nature of the victims and denies that the social relationships in which they took part ever existed.<sup>17</sup>

By symbolic enactments I mean a process of reformulation or redefinition of the history and, most importantly, of the collective memory of past events. Although the majority of victims in Argentina did not take part in acts of violence and were killed quite simply because they acted “differently,” public opinion after Argentina's return to democracy in 1983 was soon divided between those who maintained that “they [the victims] must have done something wrong” and those that replied “they had done nothing.” This debate about the victims' possible guilt or innocence distracted attention away from the real reasons for their disappearance. At the same time, it maintained the effects of terror and prevented the survivors from reappropriating their old way of life.

In his commentary on the “Wolf Man,” Freud proposed a concept that describes this process well: *repudiation*.<sup>18</sup> Unlike repression, which removes uncomfortable experiences from consciousness but leaves them intact, repudiation allows them to remain conscious, but empties them of meaning. In Argentina, it was collective repudiation rather than repression that allowed uncomfortable memories of helplessness and the guilt of survival or collaboration to be erased by lies, silence, and terror.

### ***The Role of Betrayal in Remodeling Social Relationships***

An important feature of modern genocidal societies is that the definition of “subversive” is often left ambiguous in order to justify arbitrary arrests and detentions without trial. Moreover, even though the perpetrators presumably know why they have arrested a particular person and not another, in practice the grounds for the arrest may not be made clear either to the victims or to their families. This was especially true in Argentina between 1976 and 1983 but also occurred in Nazi-occupied Europe. This ambiguity is no accident. It is one of a series of interlocking techniques designed to undermine solidarity and create an atomized society with submissive relationship to power.

Another way in which genocidal regimes undermine solidarity is through the uncertainty created by the use of informers. Once a person can be arrested for almost anything, even for listening to foreign radio broadcasts, the best way to escape being accused of a particular activity is to denounce a neighbor for doing the same thing. Denunciations are encouraged by all modern genocidal regimes because of their effectiveness in destroying social networks. In a society where anyone might be an informer, nobody knows for sure who can be trusted.

However, fear is not the only factor at work. It is true that in Nazi-occupied Poland, many Poles—and even some Jews—became paid informers in order to survive and help their families to survive. However, Robert Gellately's research into the records of the Gestapo shows that most informers were unpaid. The vast majority of denunciations were made by neighbors, acquaintances, co-workers, and even relatives, many of whom were motivated by greed, jealousy, or a desire for revenge rather than by fear.<sup>19</sup> Others were sadists enjoying power over the life and death in the name of loyalty to the regime. Whatever the different motives for betrayal, however, the population ended up forming a social order in which, paradoxically, the only "reliable" interlocutors were the Gestapo and the security services.

It is interesting to note how the Argentinean perpetrators of genocide adapted "divide and rule" techniques developed by the Nazis. In the field of education, for example, parents were encouraged to denounce teachers and students, and students were encouraged to denounce one another. In a document entitled "Instructions for Detecting Signs of Subversion in Your Children's Education" distributed by the military government in 1976, parents were warned to watch out for words like "dialogue, bourgeoisie, proletariat, Latin America, capitalism." Although words such as bourgeoisie or proletariat are commonly associated with Marxist thinking, the word "dialogue" implies a type of social relationship that goes well beyond any ideological or partisan boundaries.

In Nazi Germany the traditional German academic approach to education was dumbed down to a more emotional level. Uncritical acceptance of Nazism's racist and xenophobic outlook was regarded as essential for character building and, as one German teacher noted, "those pupils who are in positions of leadership . . . often display unmannerly behavior and laziness at school."<sup>20</sup>

In Argentina, however, the approach was different. "Instructions for Detecting Signs of Subversion" also argued that "group work . . . , which has replaced personal responsibility, can be easily used to depersonalize the child, accustoming him to being lazy and laying him open to indoctrination by students previously selected and trained to 'pass on' ideas."<sup>21</sup> Now, group work seems to be much less a Marxist strategy than a way to generate cooperation among peers. By banning group work in the name of "personal responsibility," the Argentine military showed they understood that promoting individualism is just as effective for social control as regimentation.

Another “divide and rule” technique that the Argentine military learned from Nazism was collective punishment. Together with denunciations, collective punishments were described by survivors of Nazi concentration camps as one of the most effective techniques for destroying solidarity among inmates.<sup>22</sup> This disciplinary mechanism was actively promoted by the Argentine military dictatorship in schools, as can be seen in the Ministry of Education’s curriculum materials for “Moral and Civic Education,” which also taught pupils the “importance” of informing on fellow pupils.<sup>23</sup>

In short, the informer is a product of genocidal societies, even though other societies have found less violent ways of producing the same exacerbated individualism. The mechanism of betrayal encourages people to see their peers as enemies and the institutional power as their ally. It applies the logic of market competition to moral relations, with each individual competing for the approval of the authorities, much as companies compete for contracts. This mercantile logic, which turns others into mere objects or commodities and destroys trust, solidarity, and associational power, invades all areas of social practice even after the perpetrators are no longer in power. This explains the tremendous difficulty that postdictatorial Argentina has found in organizing groups to undertake collective action, at least until the economic crisis of 2001.<sup>24</sup>

### **Postmodernism and Autonomy: Authenticity as an Alternative Strategy for Deconstruction (A Digression)**

Although an important focus of this chapter has been the use of informers to destroy autonomy, it is worth taking a brief look at an alternative and equally effective power strategy that has also—although not always—been applied in postgenocidal societies since the Second World War.

The spread of mercantile individualism as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the birth of the human sciences—particularly psychology—at the end of the nineteenth century gradually produced a new “turn” in the concept of autonomy. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, two rival notions of freedom coexisted throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the contractarian-liberal notion of the bourgeoisie and the revolutionary notion of the French Revolution. Both had humanistic and universalist connotations. However, by the mid-twentieth century, they were being challenged by the narcissistic concept of “authenticity.”<sup>25</sup>

With the advent of the consumer society, the concept of autonomy gradually ceased to mean “giving oneself the law” for the common good, and came to signify a self-indulgent pursuit of pleasure. The American hippie movements and the May 1968 protests in France, which equated free sex with a release from repression—and thus with autonomy—finally undermined the

notion of morality as something separate from individual desires and wishes. This hedonist approach to morality is strongly linked to the logic of neoliberalism. Being autonomous is understood as “doing as I please.” Liberation becomes so individualist and so dependent on buying and owning things that its revolutionary quality is not only watered down but effectively transformed into a means of domination.

Autonomy becomes equated with release from all forms of discipline, and, at the same time, release from responsibility for injustice and suffering in the world, from our mutual obligations with peers (since these conflict with our immediate desires), and from rules of civility and respect for others—thus blocking any possibility of organized social action. “Giving oneself the law” is transformed into “I am the law.” It becomes a form of absolutism that is no longer monarchical (“I am the state”) but individual and hedonistic (“I am reality”). The current profusion of spiritual self-help books is accompanied by the logic of “consuming experiences.”<sup>26</sup> Social relations are transformed into a marketplace of sensations. The “other” ceases to exist as an end in him- or herself and is seen only as a means toward ego gratification and self-satisfaction.

This is a strange way to rid oneself of Judeo-Christian guilt—through an even more demanding and complicated system of self-monitoring (although without the traditional self-control). It is not based on fear of divine punishment, but on a sort of mandatory wish fulfillment defined in terms of consumerism and perceived as the deepest and most legitimate expression of self—an authenticity that must be discovered and satisfied, a core self that is ultimately a desire to consume either goods or feelings.

In contrast, the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas rejects the notion that other people are simply objects in our subjective worlds. Levinas argues that our subjectivity does not exist independently but is formed in and through our subjection to others. In particular, I am subjected to the *faces* of others (especially the faces of the weak—orphans, widows, the poor, or the refugees) that speak to me emotionally before I can even begin to reflect on them. My emotional response turns me into a “being for others”—in other words, a moral being with responsibility for the suffering and the disadvantaged—as opposed to the “being for oneself” of postmodern hedonism. Thus, autonomy begins, ironically, with our subjectedness to others, which is a form of “heteronomy” or external control quite different from the stifling submission to authority in genocidal societies.<sup>27</sup>

### Some Political Consequences of Blocking Autonomy

The postmodern approach to autonomy based on the notion that everyone should be a “law unto himself” has led to fragmentation in the political

sphere—even in protest movements. Small isolated groups and individuals prefer to forsake the possibility of effective social action rather than give up their uniqueness and authenticity (conceived of in essentially individualistic terms) by making common cause with the rest. Instead of becoming more self-critical, which is a necessary part of the process of forming autonomous relations with others, they develop a defensiveness that operates at two levels:

1. They defend *their truth* by setting themselves up as political avant-gardes that are more visionary than ordinary mortals. Other people are just another obstacle to overcome in their evangelizing mission.
2. They defend *their identity* through the group. New social movements and “identity politics” that developed in the 1960s and the 1970s (feminism, civil rights, gay liberation, Green, etc.) fail to break out of their narrow circle and make contact with the reality and suffering of others. On the contrary, they cling to their need to solve *their* community problem, thus facilitating the maintenance of the status quo with its model of society and modes of conflict resolution.<sup>28</sup>

The continuing emergence of new social groups—increasingly smaller, more specific, and more enclosed—reflects the growing number of social sectors overwhelmed by global capitalism and finance. While such resistance to the various negative impacts of globalization is healthy in itself, it tends to miss the wood for the trees.

Gramsci identified three levels or stages of political development, each with its own form of political action. At the first stage—the “economic-corporative” level, people come together to defend specific interests. Joining a labor union for fear of downsizing or pay cuts is a good example of this. At the second stage—the “economic-political” level, a sense of solidarity develops between groups sharing similar economic interests, as when several labor unions call a general strike. Finally, at the third stage—the “state-hegemonic” level—groups are welded into a political party with long-term political, social, economic, and moral goals capable of inspiring and mobilizing larger sections of society.<sup>29</sup>

Gramsci thus recognizes that action at the “economic-corporative” level is totally insufficient for bringing about broader social change. Such short-sighted views of reality, currently glorified as media commodities, can arouse feelings of rebellion but lack the wider humanistic vision required to create a freer and more ethical society. Social movements acting at the economic-corporative level are more like consumers trying to defend themselves within the free-market system (except that their interests are moral rather than commercial). Their inability to find common causes becomes an obstacle to collective action. Their emphasis on difference becomes divisive.



### **Genocide, Autonomy, and Humanism**

Attempts to understand genocide go far beyond the sometimes morbid accounts of mass murder or even necessary acts of justice and/or remembrance for the victims. Genocidal practices are social engineering aimed at destroying relationships of equality, autonomy, and reciprocity within a given society and substituting for them power relations based on the destruction and/or reformulation of autonomy and identity. This shapes political practices in the postgenocidal society.

Genocide is a cold-blooded, rational policy, with social and political effects that go beyond the disappearance of the victims, no matter how many are killed. Understanding the longer-term objectives as well as the material and symbolic effects of genocide is a necessary step to reshape the model of postgenocide social relations, a model that leads to moral destruction.

