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Genocide as Social Practice

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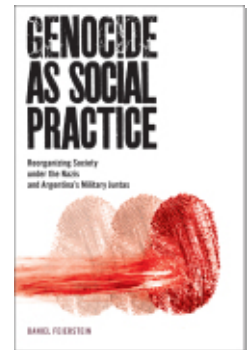
Published by Rutgers University Press

Feierstein, Daniel & Town, Andrew & Hinton, Laban.

Genocide as Social Practice: Reorganizing Society under the Nazis and Argentina's Military Juntas.

New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014.

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Discourse and Politics in Holocaust Studies

Uniqueness, Comparability, and Narration

Ways of Narrating the Holocaust and Their Consequences

Before considering different theoretical explanations of the Holocaust, we need to examine the various discourses that have grown up over the years as writers have attempted to get closer to their subject matter. Because the destruction of European Jews involved a radical break with previous social practices, social relations, and methods of killing, we also need to understand the material and symbolic implications inherent in different ways of “representing” the Holocaust.

The first historical accounts written after World War II were concerned with how the Holocaust fitted—or did not fit—into the past and future of German and European society. During the postwar period, the dominant scientific ideology was still positivism, and positivism saw history as an ascending curve of civilization and progress. People asked, then, to what extent genocide was a logical consequence of European history and to what extent it represented a break in the continuum of history.¹

Above all, the question that obsessed thinkers during these postwar decades was, “What made the Holocaust possible?” Perhaps this was the wrong question to ask or perhaps the early narratives simply left much to be desired. In any case, I will now examine some widely accepted approaches developed in response to this question in order to clear the ground for the next chapter, which deals with causal models of the Nazi genocide in a more strictly historical and sociological sense.

Demonization and Irrationality: Driving Away the Specter of Genocide

One of the first widely accepted explanations of the Holocaust was developed during the 1950s and 1960s by non-Germans² before later being revived by

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, whose book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* has been the subject of much scholarly and popular debate.³ This perspective could be defined as a complex and subtle denial of the idea that genocide is a constituting force in modern societies—an idea I have already discussed in previous chapters.

Before the late 1980s, the most frequent view of the Holocaust was that the planners, the perpetrators, and their accomplices were manifestations of pure evil. This demonizing approach was taken to a greater or lesser degree by historians such as Lucy Davidowicz and Yehuda Bauer, among many others.⁴ But it was Goldhagen who revived it in the late 1990s, when *Hitler's Willing Executioners* became a best-seller in the United States and Europe.

The demonization of the Nazis—also present in films and literature about the Second World War—served as a subtle device to ward off the specter of genocide lying at the heart of modern civilization. Portraying the Germans as barbaric hid the fact that most European societies of the period practiced material and symbolic racism. Goldhagen's position, however, is that the Holocaust was first and foremost a “German” rather than a “modern” phenomenon. In his view, the perpetrators were suffering from a “disease” that can only be understood by reference to German history. In a tortuous transposition of Christopher Browning's classic book, *Ordinary Men* (1998), Goldhagen tries to explain how “ordinary Germans” could become perpetrators without any moral qualms or mercy.⁵

Goldhagen's position became popular precisely because it stresses Germany's “unique” anti-Semitic culture. This, together with the sheer scale of the Holocaust, allows readers to distance themselves from questions of wider responsibility. Genocide can be written off as a pathology anchored in a particular time and place. There is nothing about the here and now to suggest that the reader is in any way involved in or affected by genocide. In this view, memory is nothing more than an obligation to the dead: the victims deserve compassion and the perpetrators deserve hatred and disbelief—but all this happens in the abstract. Because it has nothing to do with us, it is an “alienated memory.”

This kind of metaphysical condemnation of genocide is brilliantly expressed in the catch-phrase “never again.” The problem, however, with this post-Holocaust injunction is that it not only leaves the subject implicit (“*what* never again?”), but also the reason (“*why* never again?”). More explicit condemnations are avoided because the social conditions that breed genocide are (re)constructed each day in our contemporary nation-states.

Foucault uses the term “normalization societies” to describe modern societies undergoing a demographic explosion that the authorities then attempt to regulate through biopolitics.⁶ By demonizing the perpetrators of the Holocaust as madmen and monsters, we turn a blind eye to the “normalization” taking place in our own societies. By pathologizing genocide, and in particular the Holocaust, we create a “soothing” narrative that leaves our own strategies for

constructing identity and otherness intact. Manuel Reyes Mate condemns such smug condemnations of evil because they avoid the need for self-questioning that might lead to a vision of genocide as something more complex, nuanced, and dangerous than the congenital wickedness or folly of a particular group of perpetrators, a people, or a nation.

Appeals to congenital or cultural pathology are an attempt to avoid confronting that component of modern societies that cannot speak its name. For even if genocide is not strictly speaking inevitable, it is certainly true to say that a “genocidal temptation” lies at the heart of all modern societies, and this problematizes the ways in which we shape our identities both individually and collectively: the “me” and the “us.” However, if we can believe that genocide is a product of madness or supernatural evil existing outside any social frame of reference, it becomes a fairly simple matter to control the bad and the mad by locking them away in prisons and psychiatric hospitals or even—as has happened in the twenty-first century—by dropping bombs on them.

Since the late 1960s, demonizing theories placed a growing emphasis—particularly in the United States and Israel—on the “uniqueness” of the Jewish Holocaust.⁷ Supporters of this view claimed it was impossible to compare the genocide committed against the Jewish people with any other modern social process. Some Jewish theologians even condemned comparisons on religious grounds, arguing that they demean the sacredness and dignity of Holocaust victims. They began to shun the term “Holocaust” in favor of the Hebrew word *Shoah* (“catastrophe”) in order to exclude the Nazis’ non-Jewish victims.

This claim that the Holocaust was “unique” has had immense symbolic significance. Scholars who questioned the uniqueness of the Holocaust—as distinct from those who deny its existence—have been publicly denounced in an attempt to silence or punish them. Indeed, the concept of uniqueness has proved more powerful than any narrative. Its supporters are willing to resort to legal action on the grounds that any attempt to compare the Shoah with other historical events is an act of anti-Semitism, intended or otherwise.

But ignoring the causal and structural similarities of the Shoah with other processes tends to preserve the essential characteristics of our “societies of normalization”: control from above, discipline, obedience, control of time and space, norm-referencing, informing on neighbors, and alienation. The inevitable appearance of genocidal social practices in such societies is then seen as “exceptional.”

Uniqueness and Comparability of Genocidal Practices: The Debate about Uniqueness

To argue that a historical event cannot be compared with any other goes against the most elementary principles of historical and sociological analysis as well as

the methodology of the social sciences in general. Although all historical events are unique, this does not mean they cannot be compared. In fact, comparative studies are expected to examine both similarities and differences. This dual focus helps to develop new theoretical concepts and, at the same time, to understand the limitations of theory when faced with the specificity and idiosyncrasy of historical events. The fact that each historical event has its own unique political, social, economic, and cultural dimensions is less an obstacle than a stimulus to comparative studies.

However, *uniqueness* has been the dominant narrative of the Holocaust—at least in academic circles—for over forty years, thanks to the Jewish ethnocentrism of many genocide scholars. At the same time, a resulting dearth of historical and sociological analysis has been accompanied by an unspoken but no less serious contempt for other victimized populations. This implies that the suffering of other groups is less important and even less genuine—a view that represents a real failure, not only in academic but also in political terms.⁸

One of the main elements of confusion caused by uniqueness theories can be explained by Dadrian's distinction between singularity and exclusivity. Dadrian says, "While genocide in itself and by itself is a unique experience for any victim group, it is entirely plausible to grant certain types of genocide the attribute of uniqueness within the broader and generic category subsuming that phenomenon."⁹ In other words, uniqueness theorists start from the fact that history never repeats itself exactly in order to argue that different historical events are unrelated in any way whatsoever. Worse still, they proclaim that since the Holocaust was unprecedented and the Jews were its victims par excellence, the term "genocide" cannot be applied to any other event. In their view, any attempt to compare the Holocaust with other historical processes trivializes the Holocaust and is tantamount to genocide denial. So, perhaps a better name for this ethnocentric (or just plain egocentric) attempt to monopolize the term genocide would be *onlyness*.

Arguably, the most extreme uniqueness theorist is Steven Katz—who insisted on restricting the term "genocide" to the Shoah. However, others, such as Lucy Davidowicz and the early Yehuda Bauer, might also be included. In his later works, however, Bauer has recognized the genocidal nature of the Armenian massacres and other historical events.¹⁰

Without returning to the debate in chapter 1 on how genocide should be defined, it is worth examining the arguments of these uniqueness theorists in more detail. Accordingly, I will now consider what authors as different as Vahakn Dadrian, David Stannard, Israel Charny, Ward Churchill, Leo Kuper, and Benjamin Whitaker (in his well-known report to the United Nations) have to say about the uniqueness of the Shoah as a concept for deciding what genocide scholars are allowed to say and do.

Types of Argument and Their Consequences

In this section, arguments about uniqueness will be analyzed on two different levels: the factual level, that is, whether they are based on historically verifiable truths; and the level of implications for methodology, that is, whether a particular type of uniqueness rules out comparisons with other processes or events. A third level—the symbolic effects of uniqueness theories on narrative construction—will be discussed at the end of the chapter, where I will examine the consequences of resorting to different “story lines” about the Holocaust.¹¹

Let us begin, then, with the first argument supporting the “exclusive singularity” or uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust: the number of victims. Typically, this argument might sound something like this: “Six million victims make the Shoah a unique crime in the history of mankind. Neither before nor afterward have so many people died in this way.”

Even at the factual level, this claim is questionable. The indigenous peoples killed on the American continents in the nineteenth century alone numbered at least ten million (the exact figure varies according to the source, but in any case it far exceeds the number of Jews who fell victims to the Nazis). Moreover, between a million and a million and half Armenians were murdered in the second decade of the twentieth century, and between one and two million Cambodians were annihilated in the second half of the 1970s. This raises the question of how many million victims are required before the criterion of exclusivity applies. Is an accounting system necessary to determine whether genocide has taken place? And if so, do victims who died in Europe score more points than those who died elsewhere? Enzo Traverso has partly exposed this ethnocentric fallacy by suggesting that Europeans were much less afraid of genocide when it took place in their colonies than when the Nazis brought it into their own backyard.¹²

If numbers are a key consideration in determining our choice of research methods, what happens when there are “only” tens or hundreds of thousands of deaths, as in the Latin American genocides carried out during the era of the National Security Doctrine or the genocides of Indonesia, Rwanda, or former Yugoslavia? Can the number of victims really be definitive in these cases when often entire cities, towns, or villages were razed to the ground and their inhabitants completely annihilated? Is there really a quantitative way of distinguishing between qualitatively different social processes and, if so, how many deaths are needed to join the exclusive club of genocide victims: 10,000? 100,000? 1,000,000?¹³ If this last question sounds sarcastic, it is meant to be. By treating extermination as something concrete or material, this obsession with numbers objectifies and dehumanizes the deaths of the individuals who were annihilated.

The second argument used to support theories of uniqueness is a variation on the first one: qualitative differences in social processes are based not on total numbers, but on the percentage of casualties compared to the total population. To paraphrase the essential point made: “Two out of every three European Jews were killed by the Nazis.” This claim is also debatable at the factual level since the total number of European Jews on which the percentage is based can and has been estimated differently. So, here we have another subtly perverse number game played with casualty figures. Moreover, even if we accept two out of three as an accurate estimate, other genocides have had even higher death rates. In the nineteenth century, many of the indigenous peoples of the Americas lost up to 90 percent of their populations, while in the twentieth century, the Armenians in Turkey and the Roma in Europe both lost over two-thirds of theirs.

But of course the total number of Jews depends on cultural, religious, and genealogical considerations—unless, of course, we accept the Nazis’ definitions of Jewishness, which rather defeats the purpose of Genocide and Holocaust Studies. And how do we calculate the casualty rate in Argentina? As a percentage of the total population? As a percentage of the total membership of left-wing groups? Or as a percentage of the total number of political activists? Notice that the percentage increases dramatically as we move from overall population to political activists.

Returning to the Holocaust, the Jewish death rate was much higher in some parts of Nazi-occupied Europe (e.g., in Lithuania) than in others (e.g., in Denmark), and it was even higher in the death camps (although similar rates would apply to other victim groups in the camps). Conversely, if one takes into account the Jewish population living outside of Europe, the percentage becomes lower. So what is the purpose of calculating percentages?

This second argument, besides being conceptually flawed, is ethically harmful. Calculating “victim rates” belongs with nineteenth-century eugenics or Lombroso’s theory of the born criminal rather than with a critical approach to the social practices of genocide. Scholars cannot behave like bookkeepers, calculating a profit-and-loss account in which dead bodies are treated as investments and moved around to maximize the moral payback. This is totally unacceptable in a field like genocide studies, where a commitment to ethical and moral standards is paramount.

The third argument is more coherent in its theoretical and methodological approach since it focuses on the *method* of killing. The ways in which the victims are murdered could well be the basis for defining different types of genocide. However, we would need to see if the method of killing is sufficient *in itself* to make a historical event unique and incomparable—or at least to warrant the use of the term “genocide.”

Let us pause for a moment to consider how this argument conceptualizes the term “technology.” Uniqueness theories tend to make a fetish of technology

(in the sense of investing it with magical powers) only to include it within the less important category of *techniques*. They are not interested in the “technology of power”—that is, the power structures and social processes involved in managing people as a group, which *are* important when distinguishing between different types of extermination. They concentrate only on the techniques for killing (gassing, shooting, starvation, forced marches, etc.). In other words, they fixate on the tools rather than the process in which the tools are used. They see the Holocaust as unique because it is the first and only case of genocide using industrial-scale killing factories rather than the “cottage-industry” methods that had been the norm until then and that continued to be used after the Holocaust.

Even on the factual level, however, this argument is disputable. First, it could be argued that several post-Nazi genocides—for example, some of those that occurred in Latin America—have shown a similar level of technology in the sense of using modern techniques and even “high-tech” forms of kidnapping and disappearances. For example, many Argentine victims were dumped into the sea, bound and sedated, from military aircraft.

One thing that did appear for the first time, however, and which made the Holocaust unique, was a new technique for disposing of the bodies. As the scale of killing increased, the problem of what to do with the dead was solved with the creation of the six death camps scattered across Poland. This was murder on an industrial scale.¹⁴ The death camps were a significant historical development and deserve specific attention in order to determine similarities and differences with earlier and later processes. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is any qualitative difference between the Holocaust and other instances of genocide at the deeper level of the technology of power.

As mentioned earlier, a fixation on methods and instruments of murder rather than a willingness to examine the social practices in which they are used may lead to a fetishizing of such methods in which the instrument comes to define the practice. This type of reification is rooted in historical accounts of the Industrial Revolution which supposedly originated in various tools developed during the eighteenth century, even though many of these tools already existed as “inventions” long before capitalism and industrialization made their use economically viable.

The main methodological problem with this approach, then, is not that it leads to factual and historical inaccuracies (because it does not) but that it puts tools at the center of social processes. In the case of the Holocaust, rather than focusing on the design of the gas chambers, we need to consider what kind of social relationships can turn death into an industrial process. Considered as a technology of power, the Holocaust is no different from many other instances of genocide that followed it. But it does differ structurally from the constituent (i.e., nationbuilding) and colonial genocides that preceded it.

In chapter 2, I argued that genocide is a distinctly modern phenomenon, or a product of modernity, which can be classified into four clearly differentiated types or stages according to the technology of power used: (1) *constituent* genocide was used to create modern nation-states; (2) *colonial* genocide oppressed those living materially and symbolically outside colonial society; (3) *postcolonial* genocide repressed rebellions and uprisings in regions undergoing decolonization; and, finally, (4) reorganizing genocide attempts to radically restructure society. If the Holocaust was one of the first reorganizing genocides in history, it was not the gas chambers or crematoria that made it so, however important these were as technical innovations.

I will return to this point in later chapters, but it is worth stressing here that technical and technological differences do not invalidate comparative analyses but are rather factors to be included in them.

The fourth argument used to support theories of uniqueness refers to intentionality. “The Holocaust was the first organized effort to systematically wipe out an entire ethnic group,” this argument might run. Steven Katz makes extensive use of contemporary statements to explain why the genocide of indigenous peoples was “unintentional.” But proving this again becomes a game of numbers. In trying to establish death rates and causes of deaths, Katz confuses different historical periods, treating the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries as a single entity. In this view, most indigenous peoples died of diseases that were not intentionally transferred to America by the conquistadores. Therefore, there was no manifest intent to kill.

However, many historians would disagree that the Nazis clearly and explicitly intended to exterminate the Jewish people from the very beginning. Historians like Philippe Burrin and Karl Schleunes argue that this decision only emerged as the Nazis implemented their technology of power, and the “Final Solution” was adopted only after considering a series of alternative proposals.¹⁵ The decision to kill all the Jews had not yet been taken in 1933, much less in 1923. It was through trying out various options that the Nazis edged closer to genocide, and once the decision had been taken, implementation followed swiftly.

It is more difficult to say when this fourth type of argument applies. Intent may be a criterion for defining a genocidal practice, and indeed it is one of the three essential elements of genocide, together with acts and victim groups, under the United Nations Convention on Genocide. But historians cannot determine an intention to commit genocide on the basis of documentary evidence alone. They need to look closely at people’s actions and the outcomes of these, bearing in mind the specific features of each case, even though such an approach may entail subjective judgments about what is or is not important.

Uniqueness theorists have used a comparative approach to argue the exclusive nature of the Holocaust. Yet, paradoxically, they compare the

Holocaust with the slaughter of indigenous people in the New World or the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire during World War I, both of which were clearly sequences of actions rationally planned by the perpetrators to obtain the result of genocide, even if it is extremely difficult to find written orders in either case. On the other hand, we should remember that the absence of Hitler's signature on any document ordering the "Final Solution of the Jewish problem" does not make his or the Nazis' intention to annihilate the Jews any less certain.

To sum up, the four types of argument considered above suggest a political need to justify uniqueness (or "onlyness," as its trivialized version has been called) rather than an attempt to understand a technology of power in theoretical terms. Some uniqueness theorists seem bent on denying that any historical event other than the Holocaust of the Jews deserves the name of genocide. Events in Latin America during the 1970s or for homosexuals persecuted by the Third Reich can be safely dismissed by appealing to arithmetic ("tens of thousands are not enough cases"), while colonial genocide is best denied by questioning the techniques used or the perpetrators' "intent." As for cases like the Nazi extermination of the Roma, no argument seems to apply very well. So, these cases are either excluded from the discussion or their causality rates are minimized.

Problems and Limits of Comparative Studies: Transgressing the Taboo of Uniqueness

However, challenging the dogma of uniqueness and breaking the comparative analysis taboo creates another problem for social scientists, that is, the need to clearly define the concept of genocide lest it become so all-embracing that it explains nothing. Breaking down the dogma of sacredness is necessary but not sufficient for a critical analysis of the social practices of genocide.

To hold that genocidal social practices are—at least potentially—an essential element of modern societies is not to say that any form of violent state repression is necessarily a genocidal social practice or that all mass killings constitute genocide. Neither does it mean that all genocidal processes develop in the same way, or lead to similar results. In particular, genocide should not be used as a term of condemnation for social problems such as hunger and exploitation resulting from neoliberal economic policies in Latin America, Asia, or Africa or any other kind of state repression, however reprehensible these policies may be.

To paraphrase Helen Fein, we need to guard against the anti-uniqueness approach caricatured in the catchphrase "if this is awful, it must be genocide"—a parody that aptly depicts the way the term genocide tends to be trivialized. For even if Fein, in her criticism of Charny and Kuper, goes too far in trying to

limit the use of the term “genocide”—or, more precisely, proposes the *helplessness* of the victims as a rather unconvincing defining variable (see chapter 1)—she is right to point out that not every massacre constitutes genocide.¹⁶ The need to avoid jumping to false conclusions about uniqueness does not mean accepting a populist watering down of concepts to the point where they can mean anything and nothing. If genocide is part of a technology of power, then only some—but not all—social practices can be termed genocide. We need to be clear on this point because there is a real danger that in confronting uniqueness theories, we may swing to the opposite extreme and minimize or play down the Holocaust and/or other genocides by equating them with war.

Ernst Nolte’s work is a classic example of Holocaust minimization in which the concept of genocide is diluted by comparing the Holocaust with the Soviet revolution. Far from trying to analyze the genocide that was latent during certain periods of Stalin’s rule, Nolte depicts the Holocaust as an extension and a consequence of Soviet genocide.¹⁷ But Nolte undermines his own comparative study by failing to define the different types of practices he is referring to, their special characteristics, and their intended purpose within the given social order. In short, he fails to define his terms or contextualize genocide within a specific technology of power. Stalin developed an unusually harsh and repressive regime, particularly during the 1930s. He used many of the techniques of persecution later adopted by the Nazis—including concentration camps—and he annihilated ethnic, political, and national groups using social practices comparable to genocide. This opens up a legitimate debate on whether the concept of genocide can be applied to the millions of people murdered under Stalin. But this question cannot be answered without looking carefully at the similarities and differences between Nazism and Stalinism. The same is true of the Holocaust and the Argentine “Process of National Reorganization,” which are the main focus of this book. What is clear is that genocidal processes may have quite different causes. On the other hand, authors like Nolte seem to be looking for a way to shake off German guilt about the Nazi era.¹⁸

Perhaps the biggest headache for researchers interested in genocidal social practices and the sociopolitical models that underpin these is not so much how to categorize Stalin’s purges and executions, but how to label the clearly genocidal policies of another supposedly socialist state: Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge period between 1975 and 1979.¹⁹ But whichever historical events we are comparing, we need to account for similarities—for example, the role of modernity in the development of genocidal social practices—as well as differences, for instance, how genocidal social practices were carried out in capitalist societies, such as Nazi Germany, as compared to societies trying to build socialism, such as Cambodia. These considerations in no way prejudge the magnitude of the atrocities in question or the suffering of the victims.

It is also important to note that the uniqueness debate can have totally different implications depending on where and when it takes place. In Germany, for example, historians like Nolte have attempted to confront uniqueness in order to minimize German responsibility, a trend that requires careful ethical and epistemological analysis. In contrast, various Jewish groups in Israel and the United States have used uniqueness to give the State of Israel a sense of moral superiority that supposedly justifies human rights violations against the Palestinian people. In the rest of the world, uniqueness has tended to be used as a way of minimizing mass annihilations of other peoples as these will always be “dwarfed” by the magnitude of the Nazi genocide. In short, theoretical and conceptual debates are always situated historically, so we need to participate in such debates responsibly, bearing in mind their possible ethical and political consequences. But only by breaking the taboo of uniqueness does it become possible to analyze genocide. Of course, there is always the risk of making genocide sound more “mundane,” of including it in the broader category of “oppression” or making its different manifestations less distinctive. All these are constant temptations social scientists will have to fight against once the notion of comparative analysis has been demystified.

The Problem of “Narratability” and the “Unspeakable” in Experiences of Genocide: A Reflection on Ways of Remembering

An important point to consider here is whether it is at all possible to portray events of such magnitude and horror. Elie Wiesel has frequently stressed the impossibility of telling (“silence is forbidden, it is impossible to speak . . . those who have not experienced it, will never know how it was, those who know, will never say, not everything, not what it really was like”).²⁰ This feeling is shared by other survivors like Jorge Semprún, who contributed to making Kant’s concept of radical evil part of the hegemonic discourse of remembrance ceremonies. Wiesel’s and Semprún’s approach can be summed up in George Steiner’s terse observation that the best if not the only way to talk about genocide is by remaining silent.

Steiner, a brilliant literary critic and professor of literature, seems to be echoing Theodor Adorno’s often quoted but much misunderstood assertion that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”—a statement that Adorno himself later questioned and qualified. In the event, the Romanian poet Paul Celan, who lost both parents in the Holocaust and whose uncle died in Auschwitz-Birkenau, showed that he *could* write poetry after Auschwitz and even tried to remake language in order to narrate the supposedly unspeakable.

Holocaust scholars who subscribe to the idea of the “unspeakable” tend to superimpose personal experience and theoretical analysis in different ways. But most argue that their theoretical analysis is worthless unless the reader

can understand or personally identify with the experience: those who were not there cannot talk because they do not understand, and those who were there will never be understood. Only silence can speak the unspeakable.

Some also claim that the unspeakable is incomprehensible because it transcends (or overflows) human categories for grasping reality. They argue that the scale of the Shoah, its recognizable pattern of horror, and the despair in “human nature” it produced in the survivors make it into a single event. But, they add, the reality of the Shoah is buried in the individual memories of the survivors and is not transferable to those who did not experience it.

This notion of the unspeakable has profound implications because it raises questions about the “limits of representation.” Theologians and philosophers have asked to what extent all explanations of social phenomena are, by their very nature, subjective reconstructions and whether such reconstructions can ever recapture lived experience as such. Here, the question is whether the testimony of the survivors can ever be adequately expressed in words.

This notion of the unspeakable, however, can be a serious obstacle to constructing counterhegemonic perceptions of genocide. A notion that began by making genocide sacred has in many cases emptied it of any real meaning, albeit unintentionally. Walter Benjamin has pointed out that memory should be understood as a story told from the viewpoint of the defeated (as opposed to history, which is written by the conquerors).²¹ So, if the survivors’ testimony is reduced to the category of the incomprehensible—the unspeakable—this simply encourages the use of natural science methods to understand social reality. By relegating the testimony of the survivors—their “memory” in Benjamin’s sense of the term—to the realm of metaphysics, we become estranged and alienated from their reality and we are deprived of the opportunity to examine it from a historical or sociological point of view. In this way, the philosophical notion of *intransmissibility* creates political alienation. As we have seen, the link between the two is uniqueness theories, which prevent the analysis of historical experience. But this connection is neither direct nor obvious.

However, a word of caution is in order here. I am not claiming that *all* testimony is directly representable or directly transferable. Nor am I arguing that *all* philosophers who question the limits of representation—often in a rich and profoundly suggestive way—support the idea of the unspeakable. What I am trying to say is that by excluding eyewitness testimony we run the risk of confusing “reality” with an external, supposedly “objective” approach based on documentary sources. This notion of objectivity is so strong that many genocide historians—without subscribing to any sort of uniqueness theory—have denied the importance of eyewitness testimony from survivors on the grounds of its alleged unreliability. However, when nearly all the documents are produced by *genocidaires* as in the case of the Holocaust, there is a real risk of confusing “reality” with the vision of the perpetrators.

The documentary approach thus becomes another obstacle to developing a sociological understanding of experience. It reduces the probability that social relations will be analyzed as such and normalizes documentary accounts of them. In this sense, debates among historians about the role played by Nazi leaders in the Holocaust can be truly astonishing. Some historians are so trivial in their approach that they reduce this problem to the existence or not of a Nazi decree of annihilation—as if one of the greatest social upheavals and transformations in human history could be reduced to a piece of paper.

In short, the notion of intransmissibility has tended to break the link between eyewitness testimony and historical reconstruction, producing two rather different discourses, both of which get in the way of sociological analysis. One of these discourses stresses subjective experience but considers it to be nontransferable, while the other emphasizes history in the abstract, ignoring personal experiences and therefore making it impossible for us to understand how genocidal social practices work in practice.

A fundamental principle of modern political thought—which comes from Niccolò Machiavelli via Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, among others—is that a social practice must first be thoroughly understood before it can be successfully confronted and eradicated. First, it must be demystified and its multiple, complex, and nuanced causal relationships laid bare. This means analyzing the social relations that are central to the practice rather than indulging in metaphysical speculations about the “true” nature of reality.

However, this analysis requires survivors to identify personal experiences rather than simply talking about themselves, which is typical in historical-political reconstructions. This being the case, it is obviously even more difficult for a person to take possession of and talk about the “unspeakable.” When does silence become a strategy that prevents people from recovering and owning their experience? What connection exists between a speaking subject and the genocidal practice he or she is speaking about?

About the Modes of Narration: “Owning the Past as It Flashes Up in a Moment of Danger”

Hayden White considers Art Spiegelman’s comic book *Maus*, together with the testimony of Primo Levi, to be the most effective representations of the Holocaust.²² Although his approach has angered many Holocaust scholars, White has managed to establish a way of understanding the unspeakable that, unlike Steiner’s injunction to remain silent, does not suppress memories of trauma—does not create a split between history and testimony—but opens up limitless possibilities of representation.

In particular, White presents the idea of infinite narratability in an incisive and provocative manner. Infinite narratability—the idea that a story can be told

from any number of different points of view—results partly from the essential openness and interconnectedness of historical events.²³ Glossing over the distinction between the “speakable” and the “unspeakable,” White argues that it is impossible to give a definitive account of any historical phenomenon—not just of genocide. Whatever historical genre they choose, historians are forced to bridge an abyss between an ever-elusive historical event and their inescapably subjective retelling of that event.²⁴

Consequently, White rejects Berel Lang’s idea of an “intrinsic genre” that should predominate in the literature on genocide. Lang recommends a nondistancing, “intransitive” approach for narratives about the Holocaust, whether historical or fictional.²⁵ More precisely, he proposes that “each Jew should tell the story of the genocide as though he or she had passed through it.”²⁶ In contrast, White argues that every literary genre contains an essentially subjective gaze and so allows for committed storytelling.²⁷

Beyond individual recommendations or preferences, the significance of the Lang-White debate is that it highlights the theoretical and political consequences of choosing a particular narrative genre. These consequences do not derive from the subject matter but from the narrator’s intention. If applied literally, the nondistancing, or “intransitive” storytelling method proposed by Lang would be as clumsy and tedious as the memory of Funes the Memorious. In this fictional story by Jorge Luis Borges, first published in 1942, Ireneo Funes acquires the gift—or curse—of remembering absolutely everything. Funes is incapable of generalization or abstract thought so he needs a whole day to remember the previous day. Funes is one of those rare people we nowadays call autistic savants. Neuroscience, however, shows that most people’s memories work quite differently.²⁸

On the other hand, if all representation is reconstruction, a selection of events turned into “scenes” whose purpose is to “re-present” a unique story, the feasibility and effectiveness of the story depend on the scenes selected and the narrative framework in which they are placed. This is even truer of stories that are supposedly untellable. In short, historians and social scientists can neither remain silent nor resort to extensive first-person narratives. On the contrary, although this proposal may sound shocking to some conservatives, their task is not so different from that of a poet or novelist.

And this brings us to the key issue in this chapter: the inherent *implications* of different ways of depicting the Holocaust. Just like any other literary device used by historians, stereotyping the Nazis (and other perpetrators of genocide) as demons or madmen, or sanctifying the Shoah as unique, incomparable, even indescribable, has implications for storytelling. Different narrative forms, in turn, will produce different responses to the social practices involved in genocide: empathy and ownership, or revulsion, alienation, and dehumanization.

Davidowicz and Goldhagen do not find monsters in the documents they analyze. Rather, they transform the perpetrators into monsters through their narratives. When Steiner calls on us to remain silent, somehow he cuts us off from other ways of imagining experience. Katz does not find all Holocaust survivors to be identical. He has to invent arguments to persuade us that the survivors' experiences are identical in that they are "unique." He has to build a chain of reasoning so that his conclusion—that the Jewish Holocaust cannot be compared with other instances of mass murder—is not seen for what it really is: a stubborn denial of the suffering of other victims.

Tzvetan Todorov distinguished two ways of remembering the experience of genocide: literal and exemplary memory.²⁹ He argued that literal memory—individual narratives of atrocities and suffering—may well be "true," but that it does not help the survivors to face the future with renewed strength or hope. Instead, survivors run the danger of losing contact with present reality and becoming stuck in their victim status. Moreover, exhaustive factual descriptions of the type recommended by Lang are ultimately as impossible as they are pointless. It is impossible to connect events in literal memory. At best, one can evoke fragments. Gradually but irreversibly, these fragments lose their meaning, become alienated, and eventually fade from memory.

On the other hand, exemplary memory is potentially liberating as it allows the survivors and others to move from the particular to the general, from the events to the pattern. Exemplary memory is not just about my loved ones, my loss, but also about yours and everybody's. It attempts to learn from the past in order to give meaning to the present and the future. Walter Benjamin wrote in his critique of Ranke, "articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was.' *It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.* . . . The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious."³⁰

As explained in the Introduction, this book sets out to compare two historical events. The connection between these events is neither direct nor obvious. On the contrary, it is in some extent "contrived" in order to see what we can learn about the way genocide constructs, destroys, and reconstructs the social fabric. However, even though the events chosen are not closely related in time and space, they have not been picked at random: the criteria for their selection are conscious and explicit. I could have examined other events, but I decided to compare these as they flash up in my moment of danger in Buenos Aires at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The relationship between them is ultimately constructed through discourse—a discourse that is as legitimate as any of its kind. I am not writing in Bangladesh or Denmark but in Buenos Aires, a city haunted by survivors,

perpetrators, and witnesses of the Nazi genocide as well as Argentina's own "Process of National Reconstruction" (with one generation between them). Buenos Aires is still suffering the effects of terror and betrayal in social relations, is still anguished by silenced memories and memories with which the population is bombarded each day, by discourses relating to one or the other of the two genocides, to both or to neither.

I assume there is a continuum between the events we call genocide, a continuum that goes beyond the actual events themselves and is related to a particular form of social planning and engineering (and therefore to a particular way of redefining social relationships) that has tended (and still tends) to lead to our moral demise.

With this in mind I will now move on to discuss the causes and effects of the Nazi genocide. I will attempt not only to discover the logic that led to the Nazi genocide but also to expose the symbolic effects of genocide and the role that discourse plays in maintaining them. Although we can never completely undo the effects of genocidal social practices, I hope this will go some way to mitigating them.