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Genocide as Social Practice

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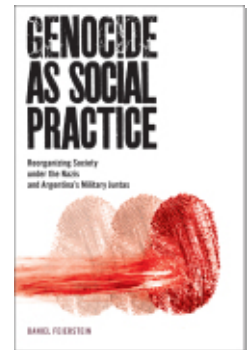
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Reshaping Social Relations through Genocide

After examining some basic approaches to the Nazi genocides, in this chapter I will offer a six-stage model of genocidal social practices, emphasizing their ability to construct, destroy, and reorganize the social fabric. This is not a historical timeline of the Holocaust, of which there have been many, nor does it attempt to analyze the successive vagaries of Nazi ideology. Rather than a succession of important events, it treats the Nazi genocides as a series of interrelated and overlapping processes.

My aim here is to highlight the progression of events necessary for implementing such a phenomenon of mass destruction, a process that begins by sapping the victims' strength and undermining "moral empathy" for the victims in the face, for example, of public humiliation, before moving on to harsher measures and finally to legitimizing large-scale killing by the state as a state policy. This model is based largely on the Nazi genocides, but the aim is to construct a model that can be applied to other genocides carried out by modern states.

I have already argued at length that racism is both a symbolic and a material contrivance allowing the state to take the lives of its citizens thanks to a biological discourse that makes the victims responsible for a gradual "degeneration" of the race—a race whose "genes" must be protected at all costs. Thanks to this biological rationale, a state that evolved to guarantee and protect the life of its citizens is "forced" to implement a machinery to destroy life—the lives of those who threaten the "health" of the wider population.

However, we will gain a better comprehension of genocidal social practices if we also examine the testimonies of survivors of Nazism. Many of their stories—particularly those of psychologists like Bruno Bettelheim and Victor Frankl, of philosophically minded writers like Primo Levi, and of political militants such as Jaika Grossman, Schmerke Kacerginsky, and Marek Edelman—allow us to understand genocide as an attempt to destroy the social fabric and,

especially, to replace critical thinking and active solidarity with authoritarian control and individualism.¹

Destruction and Reorganization of Social Relations

In his studies of children's rule games, the Swiss psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget distinguished three broad stages of moral and social development related to children's awareness of rules. The first was *pre-moral judgment*, in which rules are not understood (up to the age of four or five years old). The second was *morality of constraint* or "heteronomous morality," in which children accept the rules and authority of adults as permanent and inflexible (from five to ten years old). A third stage was *morality of cooperation*, or "autonomous morality," wherein rules are mutually agreed upon, and can be changed by mutual consent (from the age of ten). At this autonomous stage, children's thinking is no longer constrained by authority, and children can discern new solutions to problems—what Piaget refers to as the construction of knowledge, as distinct from its social transmission.

Piaget believed that a true sense of justice emerges only through "constructive" cooperation with peers, "thus adult authority, although perhaps it constitutes a necessary moment in the moral evolution of the child, is not in itself sufficient to create a sense of justice. This can develop only through the progress made by cooperation and mutual respect between children to begin with, and then between child and adult as the child approaches adolescence and comes, secretly at least, to consider himself as the adult's equal."² He also claimed that a morality of cooperation was necessary for what he termed "reciprocity"—that is, for evaluating in-groups and out-groups as being of equal worth, despite one's own in-group attachment—and for an equitable distribution of wealth and resources in society. In Piaget's words:

In conclusion, then, we find in the domain of justice, as in the other two domains already dealt with, that opposition of two moralities to which we have so often drawn the reader's attention. The ethics of authority, which is that of duty and obedience, leads, in the domain of justice, to the confusion of what is just with the content of established law and to the acceptance of expiatory punishment. The ethics of mutual respect, which is that of good (as opposed to duty), and of autonomy, leads, in the domain of justice, to the development of equality, which is the idea at the bottom of distributive justice and of reciprocity.³

Not surprisingly, critics have claimed that the games of marbles on which Piaget based his theory of moral development do not represent children's whole perception of morality. Piaget's theory has also been criticized for assuming moral universals, whereas moral and social development in non-Western

cultures may differ from those of the children that Piaget and his collaborators studied. Nevertheless, in sociological terms, the emergence of cooperative relations of reciprocity and solidarity obviously depends on members of a given society being able to perceive others as equals.

On the other hand, as Robert Paul Wolff has pointed out, "Insofar as a man fulfills his obligation to make himself the author of his decisions, he will resist the state's claim to have authority over him."⁴ For this reason, history provides numerous examples of attempts to block and dismantle nascent relations of cooperation by stigmatizing nonconformists as Others. Stigmatization works through binary oppositions, such as believer/heretic, civilized/primitive, normal/pathological, in which one pole always dominates. The binary logic of imperialism, in which white/civilized/moral/teacher/colonizer (and so on) is collectively opposed to black/uncivilized/immoral/pupil/colonized (and so on), is just one example of how "negative Otherness" is applied and extended.⁵ This process disempowers and alienates the "Othered" from their experience by forcing them to identify with stereotypes, as described in Frantz Fanon's classic study of racism and colonization.⁶

The stories of the victims bring to light the efforts of the Nazis, time and again, to break their victims as human beings, to destroy their solidarity, their dignity, anything they could be proud of; they reveal the Nazis' constant need to transform their victims into what their biological discourse (the most negative vision of the Other ever created until then) depicted them to be: a degraded, degenerate version of the human species.⁷ There are numerous testimonies of this kind. For example, Primo Levi writes:

Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, us as we were, still remains.⁸

How, then, have modern states managed the move from stigmatization to extermination? Michel Foucault argues that one of the key technologies of power of the modern nation-state is *biopower*. According to Foucault, biopower emerged in the mid-eighteenth century with the aim of defending the life and health of populations; it is exercised at the collective level through regulatory control, and at the individual level through discipline and punishment.⁹ For

example, the state might use prenatal programs to increase birthrates (“the biopolitics of the population”) and, at the same time, punish “deviants” who engage in nonreproductive sex (“the anatomo-politics of the human body”).¹⁰ Foucault claims that in a modern, normalizing society, these two levels are essentially complementary. According to Foucault, “If genocide is indeed the dream of modern power, this is not because of the recent return to the ancient right [of monarchs] to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of the population.”¹¹ However—and this cannot be stressed too strongly—in any discussion about definitions, *the political purposes of extermination must remain hidden*. As Foucault explains, “In the biopower system, in other words, killing or the imperative to kill is acceptable only if it results not in a victory over political adversaries, but in the elimination of the biological threat to and the improvement of the species or race.”¹²

In this sense, genocidal social practices not only attempt to destroy individuals as subjects “for themselves” by alienating them from their experience, but also to strip them of control over their own bodies. The choice of victims and the methods used in genocidal social practices are always political, and are meant to eliminate all forms of physical autonomy in subjects with a history of self-determination. From this perspective, it is no surprise that the Nazis’ main goal—from the moment the victims were chosen—seems to have been the elimination of all forms of bodily freedom as well as all trace of social and personal autonomy.

Robert Gelatelly divides the Nazi repression prior to the death camps into four main periods:¹³

1. Between 1933 and 1934, communists and members of other leftist political parties were placed in “*preventive custody*”—in other words, they were imprisoned without trial in concentration camps. Gelatelly estimates that about 100,000 prisoners passed through these camps, of which over 65 percent were members of the German Communist Party. Between 500 and 600 inmates were killed in these two years by summary executions or as a result of living conditions in the camps.
2. After a drastic reduction in the use of concentration camps during 1935 and much of 1936, the Nazis found a new target: the “asocial.” Dr. Werner Best, a lawyer and chief legal adviser to the Gestapo, defined asocial as “*every attempt to impose or maintain any theory besides National Socialism,*” which was “*a symptom of sickness, which threatens the healthy unity of the indivisible volk organism.*”¹⁴ In his instructions to the Kripo (*Kriminalpolizei*, criminal police) of April 4, 1938, Himmler defined asocials those “who demonstrate through behavior which is inimical to the community, but which need not be criminal, that they will not adapt themselves to the community.”¹⁵

The Kripo developed increasingly specialized branches to handle different types of “asocials,” including homosexuals, drug addicts, abortionists and their clients, adulterers, and “crimes of opinion,” constituted by the mere possibility of critical judgment about Nazism or any of its policies. This was coupled with a policy of “crime prevention” that operated by sending “potential” criminals, ex-prisoners, beggars, prostitutes, and even the unemployed to prison or concentration camps. Of the 5,000 to 15,000 prisoners interned in concentration camps between 1936 and 1938, most were “asocials” rather than communists or political opponents.

3. The Nazis simultaneously developed policies of persecuting physically and mentally handicapped people, starting with the sterilization law of July 14, 1933, and culminating in the murder of 70,000 psychiatric patients and handicapped children in the Aktion T4 operation between 1939 and 1941. The persecution of homosexuals, though less well documented, produced between 5,000 and 15,000 victims.
4. From June 1938 onward, racial policies gradually predominated. At first, these affected only Jews and Gypsies, but after the German invasion of Poland in 1939 policies became increasingly anti-Slav, particularly with regard to the Polish population and—after the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941—Russian political prisoners and Russian POWs. The Nazi-organized pogrom of November 1938 known as *Kristallnacht* culminated in the arrest of between 20,000 and 30,000 Jews, 1,500 of whom were sent to concentration camps accused of being “asocials.” About a hundred of these Jews were murdered and the rest were released after a few weeks, but not for long. Simultaneously, Himmler ordered the arrest of at least 200 unemployed people in each police district of Germany. The detainees were used as “free labor” in labor camps as a way of encouraging others to work. In 1939 there were just over 40,000 concentration camp inmates, but with the creation of these new labor camps and the outbreak of war, these figures increased enormously, making Nazi camps a radically new experiment.

The evolution from concentration camps to labor camps and then extermination camps, each with their own policies of systematic annihilation, will be analyzed later in this chapter. However, the general trend can be interpreted as follows.

Before World War II the Nazis persecuted those who behaved or expressed themselves physically in ways they considered politically subversive or “abnormal.” Persecution even extended to those dedicated Nazis who tried to maintain some autonomy and a critical voice within the Nazi movement, as happened with the *Sturmabteilung* (the paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party or SA), and later with certain splinter groups within the *Schutzstaffel* (Protection Squadrons, or SS). More generally, anyone who objected to Nazi militarist or racist policies,

or who refused to take their place in the world of work or the law, who was a homosexual or practiced interracial sex with Jews, Gypsies, or Slavs, could become a target. However, by 1938 the great enemy of the Reich had become the Jews.

In the immediate prewar period, the Nazis saw the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe as the “breeding ground of all the Jews in the world.”¹⁶ That is why they argued that to “stop the Jews was to stop communism.”¹⁷ Central European Judaism in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century was, in the eyes of the European bourgeoisie, a subversive mode of identity construction, characterized by a culture that based decision making and action on critical thinking. This was a culture that valued the rabbinical discussions in the Talmud and the ethical thinking of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that challenged Kantian ideas. Its “assimilated” versions were to be found in Marx, Freud, and Einstein, who had effectively deconstructed the scientific thinking of their time, and in the Jewish-influenced Marxism of Walter Benjamin, among other thinkers.

Toward an Attempt at Periodization

In the six-stage model of genocidal social practices developed below—one which is largely based on the Nazi genocides, as mentioned earlier—we will see state-sponsored murder used to destroy the capacity for self-determination both of other “races” and of the mainstream population. The first step involves identifying the break that made later genocidal practices possible. This was the moment when the Nazis managed to limit expressions of autonomy in politics and the workplace, in religious beliefs and practices and in private life, stigmatizing any who used their bodies, cultural heritage, or intellect in ways that deviated from the Nazi worldview.

In this sense, Foucault’s ideas on the “society of normalization” are obviously relevant, as are Bauman’s insights about Jewish identity as the prototype of negativity during the modern era. This idea is also supported by Mayer and Traverso. As we saw in the previous chapter, before the founding of the State of Israel, the Jews “straddled” modernist conceptions of identity based primarily on citizenship of one nation-state or another.

Certainly, the Nazis’ choice of the Jews as their archetypal enemies was neither inadvertent nor trivial. However, neither was it, as many have claimed, the inevitable result of centuries of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism cannot account for the Nazis’ persecution of non-Jews and—as we will see later—has had little to do with the annihilation of populations since 1945.

In the following sections, I argue that a sociological understanding of genocide as a social practice needs to take into account three interconnected processes: the construction, destruction, and reorganization of social relations.

Accordingly, the periodization that I propose is different from that suggested by Gregory Stanton in his “Eight Stages of Genocide,” which begins with the classification of groups into “us and them,” and ends with the attempts of the perpetrators to block investigations of the crimes.¹⁸

What I present here is a six-stage process, beginning at the moment that a group of individuals with an autonomous social identity is negatively constructed as Other and continuing until its symbolic extermination in the minds of the survivors, which may happen *after* the physical acts of extermination themselves, and rob the survivors of the possibility of being subjects “for themselves.”¹⁹ Not all the stages described are strictly sequential. In practice, there is often considerable overlap between the different stages, although each of those on the path to mass murder constitutes a necessary step in the process.

The model emphasizes the negative ways in which the state brands those who think or behave differently in such diverse areas as sexuality, politics, religion, and the workplace, but also the fact that the extermination of those groups that lie outside the “norm” is a clear message to the population that no deviation from the “norm” will be tolerated. The ruthless efficiency of state punishment, reinforced by official rhetoric and allowing no exceptions, is designed to make the standardization of society seem inevitable.

Although most of the examples included below are drawn from the Nazi genocides (because they are most likely to be familiar to the reader), the model is intended as a tool for understanding many other social practices of genocide, such as those in Indonesia, Latin America under the National Security Doctrine, Cambodia, and the former Yugoslavia, to mention just a few. In other cases, like those of Rwanda or Sudan, some of the stages described may require further adjustments.

Stage One. Stigmatization: The Construction of “Negative Otherness”

The first step in destroying previously cooperative relations within or between social groups is *stigmatization*. In order to construct the “negative Other” as a distinctive social category, those in power draw on symbols in the collective imagination, build new myths, and reinforce latent prejudices. Two groups are thus created: the majority or in-group (“us”), and a minority or out-group (“them”) that does not wish to be like everyone else—and therefore does not *deserve* to exist.

Various religious, ethnic, national, political, or social groups have been branded as “abnormal” or “inferior” in accordance with political needs at different periods in history. These groups have included non-Catholic Christians, such as the Cathars; Armenians, Syrians, and Greeks under the Ottoman Empire; *kulaks* in the Soviet Union; Jews and Gypsies under the Nazis; communists in Indonesia; the urban population in Cambodia; and Bosnians in the former Yugoslavia, to name just a few. In the contemporary Western world,

the targets of state discrimination are sexual minorities, prostitutes, immigrants, Muslims, and the poor, among others.

Violence at this first stage is verbal and symbolic. The categories of thought and perception created will later lend legitimacy to the need for extermination, but it is too early to speak in such terms. Those in power still *tolerate* the stigmatized group, but consistently draw attention to it and problematize it. The “solution” to the problem—genocide—will come later.

The French Revolution and the nineteenth-century liberal states that grew out of it proclaimed that all men were equal, expressing the need of the bourgeoisie to wrest power from the nobility. At the same time, the notion of citizenship constructed others as equal members of society and—more generally—of humanity. This development was seen by many as dangerous, given its potential for empowering the working classes and marginal sectors of society as well. Legitimizing new nation-states on the basis of discrimination, exclusion, and genocide required a discourse different from that of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The genocidal practices of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries necessitated dividing the human race into several superior and inferior “races.”

This process of redefining humanity inevitably drew on elements from the past, especially the stereotype of the Jews. Vilified for centuries by the medieval Catholic Church, by the sixteenth century European Jews were being portrayed by Christian preachers as less-than-human agents of the devil responsible for nearly every misfortune ranging from drought and the plague to street crime. From here it was a short step to the Nazis’ biological, political, and psychological discourse of the Jew as the Other par excellence, accompanied by a chorus of minor Others such as gypsies, Slavs, homosexuals, political dissidents, the crazy and the lazy, the disabled, the unemployed, criminals, prostitutes, and drug addicts.

Charles Papiernik, a survivor of Auschwitz, illustrates the Nazis’ need to establish a stereotypical Other:

One day, two guys arrived at the camp from France. One of them was the typical Jew that anti-Semites liked to show off. He had a long nose and was a bit stupid, too. He must have been twelve or thirteen. He spoke loudly in French and said, “I am very well here, because at home they beat me, they beat me in school, and here they look after me.” He did not understand where he was. When the SS arrived and saw that boy. . . . They had the time of their lives! They told someone to bring some chocolate to eat and they put it on the table in front of him. Then they turned to all inmates in our blockhouse and told us: “You are responsible for this boy surviving. He must survive. Because we intend to show the world what the Jews were like.”²⁰

Stereotyping, then, is the first step toward isolating a social group that will later be scheduled for extermination. The authorities resuscitate or reinforce prejudices existing in the collective imagination and create new symbols and myths to exclude previously assimilated (or at least tolerated) social groups. This serves a double purpose: it confirms the identity of the majority (“us”) as ordinary, everyday people—and at the same time it stigmatizes those minorities (“them”) who refuse to behave like everyone else and therefore *have no right to exist* at all.

Thus the Nazis revived anti-Jewish prejudices that had once been widespread in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and portrayed Jews in diverse and contradictory ways as usurers, capitalist exploiters, sexual miscreants and corruptors of morals, and good-for-nothings, as well as political agitators, communists, and thugs.²¹ These prejudices included the stereotype of the Jews as “Christ killers” and libels about an alleged Jewish world conspiracy. The latter became prominent after the publication in Russia in 1903 of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an anti-Semitic hoax distributed in several languages throughout and beyond Europe by the tsar’s secret police.²² *The Protocols* was seen by many—including Adolf Hitler—as proof of a conspiracy among Jews, Freemasons, communists, and others to take over the world and, although exposed as a forgery in 1921 by *The [London] Times* newspaper in a series of articles reprinted in the *New York Times*, it became compulsory reading in German schools after the Nazis came to power in 1933.

Did the Nazis really believe their own anti-Semitic propaganda? Chosen as “representatives” of the unassimilated (and unassimilable) elements in German society, the Jews served the Nazis’ political agenda even if many Nazi leaders—some of them men with Ph.D. degrees—must have been skeptical about official Nazi ideology. It is, however, important to note that in other historical contexts, very diverse ethnic, national, or social groups have played the role of unassimilable elements—from heretical Christian groups, such as the Albigenses and the Cathars, through “witches” from the early thirteenth to the late seventeenth centuries in Europe and America, to the Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks in the Ottoman Empire, and Muslims in the former Yugoslavia, to mention just a few well-known instances. In today’s Western societies, their place has been taken by—among others—sexual minorities, prostitutes, immigrants, Muslims, and the poor.

During this first stage, when *Otherness is being constructed*, violence is expressed through images. These images legitimize the need for extermination even though nobody is yet speaking in these terms. The authorities still tolerate those who are different, but consistently discriminate against them, branding them and constructing new identities for them. In short, this negative labeling of others is both a key process in constructing identities in the modern world and the first step toward genocide.

Despite the widespread occurrence of this process, local variations in the way others are stigmatized determine the feasibility and possible effectiveness of implementing genocide at a later date. Genocide is scarcely possible without a broad social consensus. For example, in countries like Poland, Hungary, and Romania, where prejudice and hatred against the Jews had already given rise to sporadic killings, genocide could be implemented fairly quickly after the official stigmatization process had begun. France was a special case, given the Dreyfus affair, which divided the nation in the 1890s and early 1900s, and the role of French thinkers from Count Boulainvilliers (1658–1722), whom Arendt sees as inventing the “discourse of race struggle,” to Count Gobineau (1816–1882), the inventor of the notion of degenerative racism.

By contrast, in most modern, emancipated societies such as Germany, Holland, and Denmark, the process was much slower. Indeed, when Hitler ordered Danish Jews to be arrested and deported in 1943, ordinary Danish citizens helped the resistance movement to evacuate around 8,000 of them (95 percent of Denmark’s Jewish population) to neighboring Sweden. Similarly, Bulgaria’s civilian population played a crucial role in saving the country’s 48,000-strong Jewish population by pressuring the Bulgarian government to prevent deportations even though the latter had introduced anti-Semitic legislation two years earlier clearly modeled on Germany’s Nuremburg Laws.

Stage Two. Harassment

This stage marks a qualitative leap from symbolic to physical violence. In general, it advances more quickly in times of crisis, as the anxiety and latent violence resulting from current deprivations and uncertainty about the future can be directed against those who insist on maintaining a separate identity or on flouting norms others have accepted. Typically, the stigmatized group is accused of causing the crisis by corrupting public morals, undermining national unity, or conspiring with foreign agents in ways that would not normally stand the test of common sense.

Harassment is characterized by two types of simultaneous and complementary actions: bullying and disenfranchisement. First, radicals or “shock troops” carry out sporadic attacks, claiming that their “tolerance” is at an end and calling for “firm action.” These attacks achieve several goals simultaneously. They deepen the process of stigmatization; they test society’s readiness to buy into physical violence; and they provide an excuse to recruit and organize a repressive apparatus to “manage” the situation.²³ The authorities use the breakdown of law and order created by these “spontaneous” acts of aggression to justify authoritarian and repressive policies, and to strengthen the “legitimate” security forces. Often, the victims are so intimidated by these ongoing and seemingly indiscriminate acts of aggression that they are ready to move to the relative safety of a ghetto. Segregation is precisely what happens at stage three (see

below), and generally marks the point of no return toward extermination, which is stage five.

Second, the authorities gradually deprive the stigmatized group of its civil rights. This begins with restrictions on property and marriage, as well as on practicing certain professions and customs (e.g., the Nazi prohibition on *kashrut*, or kosher slaughtering), and ends in the loss of citizenship. These measures increase support for the regime by “normal” citizens, who are able to buy the out-group’s property and businesses at knock-down prices and gain access to better jobs and positions, while limiting the number of unclassifiable children of mixed marriages. At the same time, they reduce the out-group’s freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and potential for development.

At this stage, policies are aimed at forcing the out-group to leave, rather than killing it outright. Those who cannot flee into exile are subject to social exclusion. This exclusion marks a much more important step toward extermination than exile, because isolating the victimized people within the “normalized” society does not resolve the dispute between same and different, but simply creates a need in the minds of the authorities to find a “final solution.”

Even though extermination remains a seemingly remote possibility, this is also the point at which recruitment and training of the future perpetrators begins. Just as a regular army requires an officer corps to develop strategy and tactics, as well as to train and discipline the troops and lead them on the battlefield, a genocidal army requires an organizational structure to provide ideological indoctrination and training in kidnapping; tactics to subjugate and dehumanize the victims; torture to extract information; and finally the murder—without moral qualms or physical revulsion—of unarmed civilians.

As already mentioned, extermination at this stage is only a remote possibility and policies of physical and legal harassment are more directed toward excluding the stigmatized group. Now, exclusion can take two forms: external and internal. External exclusion involves expulsion of the group from their country or, at least, from their habitual area of residence. From the thirteenth century until Jewish emancipation in the early nineteenth century, the Jews were driven out of nearly every European country at one time or another. The Reich Central Office for Jewish Emigration, set up by Eichmann in October 1939, aimed to expel Jews from the Reich, although it is still debated whether by then genocide was not already in the cards since by February 1939 most Jews had been robbed of the means to emigrate.

However, in attempting to explain the Nazis’ move from emigration to extermination policies, it is often assumed (see, for example, Christopher Browning) that emigration has proved “ineffective,” as if the Nazis’ only goal was to separate the out-group from the in-group. From the perspective I am trying to develop in this book, the question is whether migration effectively solves the problems created by the suppression of certain social relations linked to

autonomy, solidarity, and critical thinking—solves them, that is, for the perpetrators—or whether it is just an intermediate step toward genocide.

In the case of the Jews, the question is, what would have happened if the Nazis' emigration policy had been more successful? Would the Nazis have made do with expelling the Jews from Germany, as Ferdinand and Isabella had done in 1492 in Spain? Or was death an essential ingredient of the Nazis' "technology" of power? Would it have been possible to unravel and reweave the social fabric of even the German state—not to mention the Reich or the rest of Europe—without resorting to the terror induced by mass annihilation?²⁴ The Nazis' insistent demands that their allies send their Jewish populations to death camps in spite of their allies' reluctance to do so—especially Italy and Bulgaria—seem to support the hypothesis that expulsion from the Reich was not enough and that the need to annihilate the Other lay at the heart of the Nazi state and its policies toward European populations.

Stage Three. Isolation

At this stage, the focus shifts to social and territorial planning. This stage has taken different forms at different moments in modern history, but the goal is always the same: to demarcate a separate social, geographical, economic, political, cultural, and even ideological space for those who are "different," and at the same time to sever their social ties with the rest of society. The ghetto, in the original sense of a restricted area within a European medieval city in which Jews were required to live, has traditionally been the most highly developed form of segregation. Other less sophisticated "ghettos" have served these same functions at different times and for different populations.

Apart from breaking all ties between the population to be exterminated and the outside world, this stage, too, achieves several objectives simultaneously. First, it makes it easier for the genocidal forces to identify the victims and, at the same time, to hide the process of harassment and extermination from the public, which would probably condemn outright murder committed in full view of the rest of society. Second, confiscated housing and property are transferred to the in-group, again strengthening support for the regime. In fact, most "ordinary" citizens in Nazi Germany felt uncomfortable witnessing the public degradation of the Jews. Although they had internalized the official discourse to the point of considering the victims to be responsible for the violence, they approved of and, in some cases, petitioned the authorities for the removal of Jews to ghettos on "humanitarian" grounds.

After a period of prolonged harassment, the victimized population often looks forward to, and even demands, relocation in a ghetto. For example, much of the Jewish community saw the Nazi ghettos as a relief from daily aggression. They did not understand that their removal from society marked a qualitative leap toward their own annihilation:²⁵ "The Jews began to yearn for only one

thing: to escape from the world of the gentiles and shut themselves within four walls where the enemy could not get at them. It was rumored that all the Jews were soon to be enclosed in a ghetto. Some were afraid; others saw this as their salvation.”²⁶ However, other Jews were clearer about the meaning of this stage in the overall process:

The ghetto was not a way to achieve Jewish autonomy, as many thought, but an instrument with which to kill first our souls and then our bodies. The ghetto was destined to destroy our people, to completely erase it from the face of the earth. . . . In this way, they were killing the soul of our people, stripping them of the essential logic of common sense. With this system they corrupted the healthier impulses of an organized community. I assured them that the same thing would happen in Bialystok, because if not, the Germans would not have deployed there the ghetto, the police or the Judenrat [Jewish Council]. The Germans did not seek to help but to harm the Jews.²⁷

In fact, the only “autonomy” granted to the Jewish Council was the power to draw up the lists of deportees. The Judenrat decided who would die—but not when and how—and who would survive for another month or week. By giving them this power over life and death, the Nazis not only saved themselves work but undermined solidarity within the Jewish ghettos.

To summarize: isolation, like the other stages of genocide, accomplishes several goals at once. First of all, it gives the genocidaires much more room to maneuver and identify those they wish to annihilate. Also, it removes the process of discrimination, harassment, and destruction from the public gaze, and from the eyes of those who might raise ethical and moral objections. Moreover, isolation is an important step in breaking social ties between those to be exterminated and the outside world. For this reason, one of the Jewish resistance’s main objectives was precisely to stay in touch with the outside world. The chances of survival of the Jewish resistance movements depended on contacts within the non-Jewish world, but so did those of other inmates of the ghettos: the life and death of whole families as well as the success or failure of the resistance actions depended on maintaining underground networks outside the ghetto and sending children out to smuggle food and information into the ghetto.

Stage Four. Policies of Systematic Weakening

At this stage the perpetrators set priorities. They distinguish between those that *must* be exterminated, and those that *may* be exterminated, depending on the political and social circumstances and the perpetrators’ capacity to kill. Once the victims have been isolated from the rest of society, the perpetrators typically implement a series of measures aimed at weakening them systematically. These consist of strategies of *physical destruction* through overcrowding, malnutrition,

epidemics, lack of health care, torture, and sporadic killings; and of *psychological destruction*, manifested in humiliation, abuse, harassment or killing of family members, attempts to undermine solidarity through collective punishment, the encouraging of collaboration in categorizing and classifying prisoners, and denunciation and peer abuse.

The main goal at this stage is to select those who *must* be exterminated. Some are murdered; others die of hunger or disease; yet others *adapt* by identifying with the behavior and ideology of their victimizers. This phenomenon, similar to the Stockholm syndrome studied in hostage situations, is mentioned by many genocide survivors. It leads not only to the psychological destruction of the individual, but to that of the group, as individuals are coerced to behave aggressively toward the so-called unfit.²⁸

Once the victims have been systematically weakened, and with the necessary political consensus and technical facilities in place, the process may proceed to the next stage: extermination. If not, the cycle will begin again. Subcategories of Others will be established for harassment; and the perpetrators will further degrade their prisoners (whether they still reside in a ghetto or have been transferred to a concentration camp) by making them turn against one another. Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor, describes how this was accomplished by the Nazis, using the *kapo* system:

If one offers a position of privilege to a few individuals in a state of slavery, exacting in exchange the betrayal of natural solidarity with their comrades, there will certainly be someone who will accept. He will be withdrawn from the common law and will become untouchable; the more power that he is given, the more he will be consequently hateful and hated. When he is given command of a group of unfortunates, with the right of life or death over them, he will be cruel and tyrannical, because he will understand that if he is not sufficiently so, someone else, judged more suitable, will take over his post. Moreover, his capacity for hatred, unfulfilled in the direction of the oppressor, will double back, beyond all reason, on the oppressed; and he will only be satisfied when he has unloaded onto his underlings the injury received from above.²⁹

In the ghettos, labor camps, and concentration camps of the Third Reich, these three stages—*physical destruction*, *psychological destruction*, and *selection* were repeated in a spiraling crescendo. In the Warsaw ghetto, for example, the mortality rate increased from an average of 500 deaths per month in 1939 to more than 5,000 deaths per month in 1942 as food rations were cut, living spaces became increasingly overcrowded, and infectious diseases multiplied. Starvation, illness, and constant harassment by the Nazis created a “market-place of informers,” both among the local population and among the Jews themselves: groups of people living by denouncing others, accusing them of being

communists, saboteurs, and dissidents or simply having left the ghetto in search of a piece of bread. The Jewish police also sank into moral degradation, as they went from house to house looking for hidden children so as to cover the daily quota of deportees required by the Nazis.

On top of the physical and mental suffering, the Jews were forced to participate in an ongoing process of “selection” and so to construct still “others” within the Other. How successful this Nazi strategy of “divide and rule” really was is clear in Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s account of the annihilation of the Jewish community in France.

The UGIF (General Union of the Israelites of France) was a Jewish organization created by the Vichy regime that brought together “noble” French Jews so “integrated” into French society that they believed themselves safe from the Nazis. After first handing over all the “foreign” Jews (Polish and Ukrainian migrant workers), the UGIF was forced to cooperate in deporting France’s Jewish proletariat before themselves being deported to Drancy. In the words of Vidal-Naquet:

The Nazis think differently: for them there is no fundamental difference between André Baur and a little Polish Jewish tailor. Whatever the stages of their plan may have been—and they were very complex—they laugh heartily at the differences between French people and foreigners, but to achieve their destructive purpose they are willing to use all existing differences, to use foreigners against the French, Leo Israelowicz—who was the head of the UGIF liaison office with the Gestapo—against André Baur, the French against foreigners. . . . This game of the rope and the hanged is terrible, tragic; the notables who ran the UGIF played it with their social and political habits, their class reflexes.³⁰

The Nazis developed a whole series of clever and vicious tactics to deepen this moral confusion, establishing the number of deportees, haggling with the leaders of each Judenrat over a few thousand deportees to make them feel they have saved part of the Jewish population, but giving the responsibility for drawing up the list to the leaders of this Jewish “self-government.”

And so these members of the Jewish pseudogovernments believed they had become something like demigods, capable of granting life and death, trying to rationalize their decisions by including the sick, the elderly, even children on their lists with the excuse that they must keep alive others with real chances of survival. There were also cases of corruption, leaders who changed names on the lists in exchange for money, jewelry, or anything that a family could give to “rescue” one of its members. To a greater or lesser degree, everyone in the ghettos fell into the same ethical trap. Jaika Grossman describes it with his usual wit:

Those who believed before the war that it was possible to achieve socialism peacefully, to bring the workers to power by an indirect route,

avoiding confrontations; those who thought they could liberate the people without casualties, without mobilizations, but with a deep inner revolution; those were the same ones who brought to the people the mistaken and falsely deluded idea that Nazi conquest, murder and oppression could also be avoided. They directed their own movements and the people's to avoiding and concealing the facts in times of such desperate confrontation between two worlds. As if an entire nation could slip through the cracks in history. One or two might slip through the cracks—but an entire people? Leaders and society? We could not and did not want to understand any of them. We did not want to defuse tensions and reach a deal with them. These meetings were distressing both for us and for them. This was not a question of psychological differences between young and old, as interpreted by some.³¹ Nor was it about disagreements between pessimists like us, who felt the proximity of the genocide and did not want to hide it from people, and optimists like them, who believed that humanity was about to rise up and would help them avoid misfortune. Who said that ignoring reality was being optimistic and that facing it was being pessimistic? Perhaps it was the other way round. We wanted the news about the mass slaughter of Ponar to be released on a large scale but not to generate feelings of apathy or despair in people that would lead them to say: "The SS will annihilate us anyway." That would have been criminal. We wanted to publish the truth about what awaited us, to show those terrible things that were starting to happen, show them in all their authentic crudeness, so that we could defend ourselves. We wanted to get organized, to stand in the breach, to wield our weapons while we still had time.

And our adversaries? Apparently they were still not strong enough to undertake any major projects, no grand gesture, and for that reason, were reluctant to see what was happening. Was it psychological fear? No way! A fear like that could not be attributed to "ordinary" Jews, who do not know the causes of their mistakes and do not understand their relationship with the vicissitudes of the world. That is, it was a completely private panic, with no social roots in sight. It was the fear of an ideology, a view of the world and of history that, unfortunately, managed to paralyze many. That fear also became a partaker of the historical facts.³²

It is not easy to understand why the victims of the Nazi genocide did not refuse to get on the trains that took them to their deaths—or why the victims of other genocides, for that matter, do not resist more actively. But these populations have generally been defeated long before they reach the stage of physical annihilation. One simply has to imagine a crowd of people sitting or standing in the sun and rain for a whole week in the main square of a ghetto,

undernourished, dirty, and sick, almost unable to think. Suddenly they are offered toast and jam or a cup of tea, or a change of clean clothes to get on a train. Certain newsreel images—for example, the much publicized sequence of a doctor dressed impeccably in his best suit, saying good-bye to his family as he boards the train, oblivious to his fate—have distorted our understanding of the reality of this stage. Such images simply serve to hide the “systematic weakening” these people have already been subjected to.

What is remarkable is that in such extreme circumstances, there are always individuals who do attempt to resist—often placing their own lives, along with those of their own children and other family members, at risk.³³

Stage Five. Extermination

The extermination stage is characterized by the physical disappearance of those who once embodied certain types of social relations. The Nazi genocides mark a qualitative transformation of this stage, not only at the level of technology, but also at a political and symbolic level. Even during the death marches of the Armenian population in 1915, a personal relationship existed between the Armenians and their Turkish guards. In contrast, the industrialization of death by the Third Reich rendered the relationship between victims and perpetrators *anonymous*, as well as dissolving individual moral responsibility by breaking the process into a succession of separate stages. The production line started with the organization of trains and the deportation of the victims to the extermination camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmo, Majdanek, Sobibor, or Treblinka, and ended with the victims' bodies being burned and their remains ground to dust. With the gas chambers, the perpetrators did not even have to watch their victims die. This depersonalized form of murder has since been copied in other genocidal processes.

This systematic, impersonal, and tremendously efficient ability to make entire populations disappear in a relatively short period of time also marks a new stage in the exercise of power by dominant classes. The perpetrators have demonstrated to the rest of society the consequences of aspiring to autonomous control over one's own body. The new sovereign power is no longer characterized by the spectacular staging of small-scale public executions (as in earlier centuries), but by a new technology of power that, as Foucault points out, fuses the ancient sovereign right to kill with the biopolitical management of life.³⁴

Stage Six. Symbolic Enactment

Just as manufacturers only realize their investments when they sell their goods, so those who practice genocide realize their investments in killing and “disappearing” people through symbolic “representations.” In the case of manufacturing, physical goods must constantly be sold—in other words, exchanged for money or the abstract equivalent of money—for the manufacturing

cycle to continue. Unless this happens, profit turns to loss as the unsold merchandise begins to depreciate in value. A similar logic can be found in the case of genocidal social practices. Destruction only benefits the perpetrators if it can be turned into certain forms of social narrative that re-present annihilation.³⁵

In other words, genocidal social practices do not end in the physical annihilation of the victims, but rather in the symbolic ways that this trauma is represented. If the overarching purpose of genocide is to transform social relationships within a given society, it is not sufficient to kill those who think or behave differently. The types of social relationships that these people embodied (or potentially embodied) must be replaced either with traditional in-group models of relating or, more commonly, with new ways of relating. However, not all representations of the facts contribute to this transition. For example, those who hold official remembrance ceremonies, whether out of goodwill or in the belief that they can exorcise genocide merely by invoking its name, often stress the need to “remember the victims.” However, the most effective form of symbolic genocide is not oblivion, which ignores the disappearance of a way of life as if it had never disappeared, but does not preclude its reappearance. The most effective form of symbolic genocide is the pious pretense that genocide is somehow irrational and inexplicable.

For genocide to be effective while the perpetrators are in power it is not enough for the perpetrators to kill and materially eliminate those who stand for a particular social order the perpetrators wish to destroy. They need to spread the terror caused by genocide throughout society. Conversely, the best way to perpetuate the effects of terror in a *postgenocidal* society is by dissociating genocide from the social order in which it occurred—not in a crude and obvious way by denying the facts, as Turkey continues to do with the Armenians, but by changing the meaning, logic, and intentionality of genocide. In Foucauldian terms, we need to shift our focus from what the social practices of genocide set out to *destroy* (a culture, a national group, a political tendency), to what they were intended to *create* (usually, a new society). This supplies the key for how genocide can and should be remembered, or reappropriated. To accomplish this, we need to problematize the *assimilation structures* or levels of understanding at which various postgenocidal societies tend to narrate events, and which separate genocide from the social order that produced it. They do so not by denying the facts, but by distorting their meaning.³⁶

THE DENIAL OF THE IDENTITY OF THE VICTIMS. Authors such as Hannah Arendt and Stanley Milgram have commented at length on new constructions of genocide affect and how these change our image of the perpetrators. In the past, many of these works were, as a result, struck off the list of “serious” works on the Shoah.³⁷

On the other hand, the victims of genocidal social practices are deliberately and repeatedly homogenized as “innocent.” The dominant discourse at the moment when genocide is implemented tends to depict victims as culpable in innumerable ways, transforming them into agents of the devil responsible for the majority of social evils. Paradoxically, however, once the genocide has been accomplished, and to the extent that the social consensus on which the perpetrators depended has been eroded, the hegemonic gaze may move toward an emphasis on the “innocence” of the victims, proceeding hand-in-hand with the demonization of the perpetrators and their relegation to the realm of “irrationality.” In some societies, this process is accelerated by military defeat (as with the Nazis in Germany or the Hutu extremists in Rwanda), or by political defeat (as with the military dictatorships of Latin America). In other cases, the process occurs more slowly, as with Turkey or Indonesia. And in still other cases, when a consensus remains as to the legitimacy of the genocide in the society in which it occurred, the process of “constructing innocence” may take generations or even centuries—as with the annihilation of the indigenous populations of the modern states of the Americas.

However it occurs, this mode of constructing “innocent” victims ends up being even more effective than blaming them for their own destruction. It dilutes genocide as much as it appears to condemn it. It meshes easily with the image of mad, perverse, pathological, and evil murderers that emerges from the ways the perpetrators themselves legitimize genocide. Of course, I am not suggesting that the victims deserve their fate. Rather, I am saying that we need to look more carefully at the discourses justifying the persecution, exclusion, and extermination of different victims.

The “hegemonic gaze” may also be located outside the genocidal society itself, affecting how onlookers evaluate the genocidal process. Let us consider again the case of Nazi Germany as viewed by contemporary members of the societies that combined to defeat it. The Nazis invented the myth of Aryan superiority to differentiate themselves from other groups (ethnic, religious, political, social, national, sexual, or otherwise). Using a biological metaphor, the Nazis stigmatized people belonging to other groups as “degenerates” who had corrupted the race or the *Volk* community.³⁸ However, something similar has occurred in the way that Nazi Germany has been demonized in discourse since then. This relies upon a binary structure of the type described earlier—one that contrasts “irrationality” and “absolute evil” with “innocence.” The metaphysical category of absolute evil distracts attention from our everyday experience, leaving us safe from the distress that we might be caused if we were to accept the genocidal potential latent in all members of every modern society.

Many writers on Nazism take it for granted that the Jews were annihilated simply because they were Jews. However, if one examines carefully the populations exterminated by the Nazis, it is clear that the Jews played a central role in

this process precisely because Jewishness (from the perspective of the Central and Eastern European regimes of the 1930s) was *more* than just a question of having three Jewish grandparents. The stigmatizing of certain groups was connected (more or less accurately) with their subversive potential or inability to adapt to a given social order. It should be remembered that most Jews in the 1930s saw themselves as “international” (which does not mean that they were involved in international conspiracies, as the Nazis alleged), and so were unconvinced by nationalist ideologies.

It is surprising to note the extent to which certain political, religious, and moral tendencies of Jewish collectivities in Central and Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—in particular, in the area the Jews called the “Pale of Settlement”—have been neglected or forgotten in scholarly analysis. A powerful symbol of this is the massive Jewish participation in numerous oppositional and contestatory movements (whether revolutionary or reformist), from the Spartacists to the communists, anarchists, Bundists (the Jewish Workers Party), and socialists, in Germany, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, and Lithuania. These include such specific cases as the “Jewish Soviet” in Hungary under the Béla Kun government, the Jewish socialist prime minister Léon Blum in France, and the vital Jewish participation at the leadership level of various Russian and Polish revolutionary movements.

The most important dimension, however, is not the Jews’ numerically large participation in such contestatory movements, but their link with a deeper, more global element, linked to the scant support that Jewish nationalism (Zionism) and non-Jewish European nationalisms aroused among Jewish populations, until the Nazis appeared on the scene. Because of the persecutions suffered by Jews in Russia, Poland, and Lithuania, and because of their marginalization in Germany and France, Jewish communities continued to view themselves as “diasporic” in nature, founded on multiple identities, capable of transcending their Jewish cultural component; their assimilation within the national territories they inhabited, whether German, Polish, Russian, or French; their greater or lesser religious convictions (many Jewish groups were atheists, others were reformists, others Orthodox, but all considered themselves Jewish beyond their specific religious or nonreligious identification); and their political identity (which was highly varied, though in general forsaking a nationalist tendency for a diverse range of internationalist and diasporic currents of thought).

This is not to suggest that all Jews shared in this process of self-identification. In the Netherlands, for instance, Jews were much more assimilated into the national identities of their countries. But they were exceptions in the world of European Jewry during the first half of the twentieth century. In general, Jews stood apart from the wider patterns of European nationalism of the period. Only by understanding this tendency can we hope to comprehend the key elements

of European Jewish identity and their role in fueling the paranoid delirium of the Nazis with respect to the supposed “risks” Jews posed to “western European identity.” The Jews obviously did not represent the kind of threat depicted by the Nazis, but their general readiness to embrace multiple identities—indeed, their recognition of the multiplicity, complexity, and dynamism of identity formation—*did* pose a challenge to the narrow nationalisms prevailing in Europe at the time. This was problematic and “subversive” for a model of identity, such as the Nazis’, which sought to subordinate all such identifications to those of the organic *Volk* of a well-defined national territory. In a philosophical sense, Jewish identity was constructed “in time,” while modern European identities were constructed “in space.”

It is this distinction that allows us to perceive Hitler not only as an alienated figure, but as an extreme expression of a hegemonic political tendency in modern Europe. This perspective also allows us to understand the complicity of diverse European regimes in the annihilation of the Jews, their failure to react, their refusal to accept Jewish refugees in their territories, among other elements that have generally remained unexplained or been relegated to a banal analysis of the greater or lesser “political will” of the various governments in question.³⁹

Similarly, scattered groups of Gypsies who refused to adopt German as their mother tongue, to water down their centuries-old culture, or to accept the notion of private property were lumped together with those who refused to accept sexual norms. In fact, any group that maintained a certain level of social self-determination became a political target for the stifling heteronomy imposed by the Nazis. To recover the identity of the victims, and preserve their memory and history, it is essential for us to understand *why* they were exterminated. Far from justifying their fate, this understanding is intended to reinstate the victims as social subjects.

Bettelheim touched on this controversial issue with his questioning of the Frank family as a worldwide symbol of the Holocaust. It is not that he did not respect their suffering. Rather, he felt that choosing the Franks as a symbol made it harder to understand the genocidal process. In Bruno Bettelheim’s words: “I believe that the worldwide acclaim given [Anne Frank’s] story cannot be explained unless we recognize in it our wish to forget the gas chambers and our effort to do so by glorifying the ability to retreat into an extremely private world . . . that was glorified precisely because it led to their destruction. . . . What we miss is the importance of accepting the gas chambers as facts, so they can never again be allowed to exist. If all men are basically good . . . then, really, we can all continue with our daily lives and forget Auschwitz.”⁴⁰ According to Bettelheim, the Frank family became a symbol of the Holocaust not just because they did not try to escape or to fight back, but because they were a “civilized family,” an “assimilated” family, in this case, that was not very different from other non-Jewish families in Europe. They continued to live in their own private

world until their very last day together. We might also add that the Franks were Dutch Jews, living in a Nazi-occupied territory rather than in Germany. Certainly, the Franks were victims of the Nazis; the point is that the use that has been made of their story does not help us to understand what it was that the Nazis hated about the Jews to the point of wanting to kill them all.

On the other hand, the attention given to the story of the Frank family seems to suggest that the internment in concentration camps of German antifascist Jews—Communists, Bundists, Zionists, and even Orthodox Jews—was somehow more understandable, and perhaps “almost” justifiable. After all, they were political enemies; they were not murdered simply for being Jewish. The problem is that if we condemn the Holocaust for selecting the “wrong” victims, or because the Nazis overestimated the subversive potential of Judaism and failed to understand the multiple and contradictory nature of Central European Jewish identity in the first half of the twentieth century, we perversely end up legitimizing the logic of genocide. We also miss the point that Central European Jews were murdered precisely for what they did, and not for what they failed to do.

THE TRANSFERENCE OF GUILT. A more subtle form of symbolic genocide is the transfer of guilt through scapegoating and self-scapegoating. Through a perverse psychological mechanism, those victims who actively oppose a genocidal regime—that is, those who are “less innocent”—are blamed or blame themselves for the deaths of those who are “more innocent.” In this way, a chain of responsibility is forged that assigns varying degrees of guilt and innocence to the victims of genocide, while the actual perpetrators are regarded as a mere force of nature, meting out the punishment sought by the “guilty.”

The Vilna ghetto established by the Nazis in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius provides a clear example of transfer of responsibility. In 1943, the Judenrat agreed to hand over Yitzhak Wittenberg, the leader of Jewish armed resistance, to the Gestapo. In a speech delivered in the main square, Jacob Gens, the head of the ghetto, accused the resistance of provoking the Nazis into liquidating the ghetto, and turned the population against the members of the Jewish resistance. Finally, Wittenberg himself made the decision to give himself up.⁴¹

If there is one lesson to be learned from the Vilna ghetto, it is that appeasement does not work. Later that same year, the whole of the ghetto was liquidated, and the only people who survived were the resistance forces that fled to the surrounding forests. For the victims, appeasement was a way to buy time and avoid collective punishments; but for the perpetrators, it was simply a predictable result of the strategy of systematic weakening described earlier, allowing them time to solve the technical problems of implementing a “final solution.” Appeasement brings no peace but the peace of a cemetery, where even the names of the dead have been erased.

There were many factions of the Jewish leadership of the time who accepted the notion of “collective responsibility,” which turned resistance into guilt and genocide into a sort of natural force waiting to be spurred into action by “irresponsible” resistance. This logic ended up legitimizing the forces of domination, which were “peaceful” as long as they were not “provoked.” And yet what some described at the time as “collaboration” was obviously just a survival strategy. To attempt to justify such behavior after the event prevents us from recovering the true identity of the victims.

HORROR AND PARALYSIS. In postgenocidal democracies, symbolic annihilation of the victims through the discourses of “innocence” and “metaphysical evil” is reinforced by the morbid fascination of the media and popular historians with the details of the crimes themselves. We are inundated with blow-by-blow accounts of suffering, descriptions of torture and execution, and other horrific testimonies, together with an abundance of spine-chilling photographs. None of these contributes much to our understanding of why the victims were killed. On the contrary, it simply perpetuates a sense of terror and paralysis throughout society. “Memory for the victims” is turned into a sort of horror show.

Similarly, the use of genocide as a political symbol in postgenocidal democracies is not linked to silence and oblivion. If the Armenian genocide continues to be a political taboo in modern Turkey, Western democracies have replaced the strategy of “taboo” with an excess of empty political declarations that avoid questions about the identity of the victims or the true beneficiaries of genocide, and so continue to make restorative justice impossible. In many postgenocidal societies, those who make a genuine effort to confront this injustice may wind up being tortured or murdered. But even when the threat of physical violence is no longer present, a network of symbolic and discursive processes continues to imprison jurists, historians, and sociologists—and even poets—within its invisible walls, limiting what can be thought and said about genocide.

Reformulating Social Relations: A Struggle for Identity

The six stages of modern genocide described above form a cycle, the central aim of which is to transform the society in which genocide takes place by destroying a way of life embodied by a particular group, and thus reorganizing social relations within the rest of society. The disappearance of the memory of the victims brought about by symbolic enactment—that is, by the enactment of genocide through discursive and other symbolic means—is an attempt to close the cycle. Not only do the victims no longer exist, but they allegedly “never existed”—or, if we know that they existed, we are no longer able to grasp how they lived or why they died. Otherwise the cycle might begin again.

What happens, then, to a society that remains silent while people are beaten in the streets and disappear? What happens to a society in which some denounce their neighbors, and others steal their jobs or businesses, their homes or other assets? All these forms of “moral participation” in genocide must inevitably lead to a blurring of moral distinctions, an inability to distinguish between right and wrong, fair and unfair. This is true not only for those who live in a time of genocide, but for subsequent generations as well.

At the same time, the trauma produced in the population by a genocidal process, and internalized as a way of relating to others mediated by terror, may manifest itself in diverse ways. One of these is survivor guilt among those who have lost relatives, friends, or colleagues. Another is the inability to assert oneself in family or social relationships or to find a group identity, found in psychotherapy patients’ storylines such as these:

“I am a Nazi, and if I express my anger, I will destroy in a most sadistic manner the lives of those who have frustrated me; in order to keep this a secret, I need to smile all the time.”

“I believe that my father was an SS officer, and the fact that he is my love-object has to be hidden, so I should repeat acts to deny my Germanness.”⁴²

The transgenerational nature of guilt and denial among members of the “in-group” is visible in the way that young ethnic German psychoanalysts, even today, are afraid to explore patients’ Nazi-related family histories.⁴³ The attempt by the perpetrators to create a “strong” homogeneous society through terror also destroys the in-group, to a greater or lesser extent—both morally and psychologically. Moreover, postgenocidal societies that are unable to recognize and mourn the processes in which they have participated remain vulnerable to the repetition of authoritarian modes of political problemsolving. In Argentina, the expression “You don’t exist” was first created by the repressors in the secret detention centers of the 1970s and filtered into in the teenage slang of the 1980s and 1990s as a colloquial form of contempt.⁴⁴

But if genocide is not directed solely at the material victims of the annihilation process, one must ask: How could trauma affect a postgenocidal society in which most people—accomplices, informers, betrayers, or simply those who had stolen or made use of the victims’ property—were silent? Can a small betrayal of human values in the course of one’s work, the breaking of a strike, an act of aggression in the street, or an anonymous denunciation be viewed as moral participation in genocide, whether through active consent or tolerance of inaction? Perhaps observing the past in terms of the present, as Tzvetan Todorov has recommended, requires us to look at the present with greater mistrust.⁴⁵ Without knowing who the victims of genocide were and why they were annihilated, we hardly know who we are ourselves, and why we live as we do.

