Genocide as Social Practice

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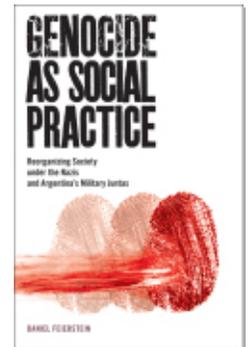Published by Rutgers University Press

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In Conclusion

The Uses of Memory

One of the main arguments running through this book has been that genocidal social practices are not simply an irrational descent into barbarism fueled by hatred and prejudice, nor are they exceptional phenomena. On the contrary, they are a specific technology of power for destroying and reorganizing social relations that has played a crucial and well-defined role at different moments in history.

The ancient world practiced "*pre-state* genocide" to annihilate enemy populations. The modern world created a new social order known as the nation-state through "*constituent* genocides" and then used "*colonial* genocides" to annex and plunder territories overseas. Later, struggles for national liberation gave rise to "*postcolonial* genocides." Finally, in the cases that I have analyzed in detail in this book—Germany from 1933 to 1945 and Argentina from 1974 to 1983—murder and terror were used to transform the social fabric of two well-established societies in what I have called "*reorganizing* genocides."

What makes reorganizing genocide different from others is that it goes beyond physical annihilation. It does not end with the death of the enemy but attempts to capitalize on death through mechanisms of "symbolic enactment." This does not mean that genocide has been the only way of transforming social relations within modern societies. In fact, all sorts of revolutions—socialist, reactionary, and corporative alike—have brought about various types of social reorganization. However, genocidal social practices were frequently used to reorganize societies in the twentieth century—especially in Latin America. Moreover, in the different societies in which genocide has occurred, collective memory has processed state terror in remarkably similar ways, all of them accompanied by a redistribution of wealth into the hands of elites.

Throughout this book I have tried to show that the systematic destruction of a part of Argentina's population can be classified as genocide, both from an

eminently legal and from a historical-sociological point of view. In legal terms, the still common refusal to apply the term "genocide" to the annihilation of political groups has no sound legal basis. The exclusion of political groups from the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was on purely pragmatic grounds: it was feared that many states might not sign this first UN human rights treaty if it laid them open to prosecution for political crimes. However, this is not sufficient reason to *defend* their exclusion *as a matter of legal doctrine.* On the contrary, it violates the basic principle of equality before the law. Moreover, as I have shown in chapter 1, most definitions of genocide used by historians and sociologists since 1980s contemplate the annihilation of political groups as a form of genocide.

I have examined some philosophical questions about the alleged distinction between "voluntary" and "involuntary" victims, and I have pointed out the legal and epistemological inconsistencies inherent in such a distinction—a distinction that attempts to deny the genocidal nature of the policies implemented in Argentina simply because the victims were chosen for eminently political reasons. As noted by Robert Cribb, advances in sociology, anthropology, and history have shown that what, fifty years ago, were believed to be fixed ethnic or racial identities are in fact dynamic and flexible, and so are impossible, in practice, to distinguish from "political" identities (especially if such definitions have legal implications).[1]

Now, some would argue that applying the term "genocide" to state terror in Argentina "depoliticizes" our understanding of these events. This is because they fail to grasp the profoundly political nature of all genocides—even those that seem driven by irrational hatred and paranoia. And it is precisely the alienation produced by "depoliticizing" the Nazi genocide and treating it as a sort of collective madness that I am at pains to point out in this book, especially in chapter 4. Moreover, I have argued that describing state terror in Argentina as genocide not only facilitates the prosecution and punishment of the perpetrators (for example, by reducing the need for repeated questioning of victims and witnesses); it also allows for a more accurate and profound analysis of the impact on the rest of society of the systematic annihilation carried out by the military government. Specifically, annihilation targeted certain social relations, creating terror, distrust of others, and competition rather than cooperation among members of society, as well as skepticism about the possibility of critical or oppositional consciousness. All these practices became hegemonic during the 1980s and 1990s.

Throughout this book I have followed a comparative approach, taking the Nazi genocide as a sort of prototype in order to clarify certain key issues. These include the "reorganizing" nature of the social practices involved; the types of behaviors that tend to become accepted as "normal"; and the types of discourse through which the experience of genocide is understood. Because these effects

of genocide were *intended*—at least by some of the perpetrators—I have called them forms of "symbolic enactment" and I have included them as a stage *within* the genocidal practice itself.

In chapters 4 and 5 I reviewed attempts by historians and sociologists to explain the causes of the Nazi genocide. In these chapters I critically evaluated the "symbolic enactment" of the Nazi genocide found in various types of narrative: the idea that Nazi genocide—or more exactly, its reduction to the Shoah—were a "unique" event and therefore not comparable with other atrocities; the idea that the Nazis were irrational demons–thus making the Shoah incomprehensible; the idea that such horror is untellable—thus silencing any attempt to understand its consequences; the idea of a specifically German genocide (*Sonderweg* theories), outside mainstream European history and inspired by age-old anti-Semitism; the "intentionalist" theory that the Nazi genocide followed a plan that was already in place when Hitler came to power in 1933. I also examined theories about Hitler's proposed racial restructuring of Europe; theories about the extermination of the Jews as part of a European civil war or counter-revolutionary process; theories that explain Nazism as part of "normalization" processes in modern societies; and theories that understand genocide as a "social relationship" peculiar to capitalism, among others.

After this critical review of causal theories of genocide, my attempt to understand genocide as a specific way of "reorganizing" social relations led me, in chapters 6 and 8, to examine the typical path followed by these grisly processes of social reengineering. I proposed a model consisting of six stages: stigmatization (the construction of "negative otherness"), harassment, isolation, systematic weakening, physical extermination, and symbolic enactment. I also outlined the defining features of each of these stages in the two historical cases in question—Germany between 1933 and 1945 and Argentina between 1974 and 1983—as well as the chief similarities and differences between them.

Chapter 7 also examined alternative ways of defining the Argentine "Reorganization Process"—whether as civil war, counterinsurgency war, terrorism, or state terrorism—together with concepts such as the bureaucratic-authoritarian state, military dictatorship, micro-despotisms, and the binary "friend or foe" logic of power, among others. On the basis of these ideas, I suggested that the ability to understand state terror in Argentina as a genocidal social practice whose basic aim is to "reorganize" society—whether or not it exhibited features of other processes such as war—is essential for understanding the material and symbolic processes that occurred after the physical annihilation of the direct victims. The indirect victims, it will be remembered, were the rest of society. Symbolic processes appear in full force in narratives commemorating genocide.

Finally, chapter 9 explored the purpose and functioning of concentration camps, and the ways their tentacles operated not only on the direct

victims—those interned in the camps—but also on the social whole, by encouraging denouncement and betrayal, distrust toward others, and other ways of destroying or impeding reciprocal relationships between peers. I argued that the fear of torture goes deeper in its effects than torture itself. At the same time, I emphasized what I call the *state of confusion* to which a generation of survivors succumbed—survivors who never even set foot in the concentration camp circuit directly. This *state of confusion*, found in many works of the period, comes from identifying defeat with ideological error. Those who are confused regard critical or oppositional consciousness as a mistake and attempt to *convert*, or at least *adapt*, to the hegemonic values of order and peace—the peace of the graveyard—and come to terms with the disappearance of solidarity, reciprocity, and responsibility for the poor and dispossessed.

The processes that make genocide possible at all have a long history. In fact, they constitute some of the most ingrained attitudes and behaviors in modern societies. In chapters 6 and 8 these processes were categorized under the headings of stigmatization, harassment, and isolation, and I argued that their victims tend to be population groups that are growing and/or changing. In fact, racism and genocidal social practices have functioned as ways of resolving the contradictions of modernity surrounding the issues of equality, sovereignty, and autonomy. As we saw in chapter 3, there have been glaring discrepancies between these principles on paper and their effect in practice in modern societies.

Of course, a book of this length cannot answer all the questions that would result from a serious attempt to confront both the causes and the consequences of genocidal social practices. It has not even tried to develop what many contemporary scholars and even some United Nations documents define as a system of "early warning" or "prevention" of genocide. Nevertheless, it is much more than a chronicle of annihilation and atrocities. It has not only attempted to problematize banal or simplistic approaches to genocide; it has also explored what happens *before* and *after* genocide. One of its central themes is the social practices that pave the way to genocide; another is how certain types of memory and certain narratives not only tend to become hegemonic in postgenocide societies, but also serve to transmit terror to new generations. In considering genocide as a process and a technology of power, I hope to have cleared the ground for new questions, surely more complex and more useful for confronting resurgences of this particular form of social engineering.

So, having reached this point, I would like to make a few suggestions for further research. One important area for investigation is the ways in which identity and Otherness are constructed—since these constructions lie at the heart of all genocidal social practices—and the role of segregation and exclusion in genocidal processes. Another important area is the question of guilt—how to assign responsibility to the different actors. This is important not only for bringing the perpetrators to justice but also for clarifying the symbolic struggles underlying

judicial processes and for constructing a new ethics, a political tool against the dehumanization and adiaphorization underpinning genocide.

The Processes of Constructing Identity and Otherness

We need to remember that genocide, like other social practices, is a process that unfolds over time. It is impossible to commit genocide without first building models of identity and Otherness, symbolic representations that suggest ways of perceiving ourselves and those whom we cast in the role of Other. Moreover, although the two develop more or less simultaneously, the Other may not be demonized until much later in the process.

The formulation of separate ethnic and national identities is a distinguishing feature of modernity even if some of its features predate the modern era. Negative typecasting has taken various forms from a simple dichotomy between civilization and barbarism to sophisticated racial theories or the racialization of class relations.[2] Whatever the case, stereotyping is a necessary step on the path toward genocide, and detecting and deconstructing negative labels while they are still being formed may help prevent genocide, or at least prevent it being repeated.

Although identity is dynamic and multiple, the construction of a negative Other forces us to limit our own identity to a narrow set of criteria. In the modern period, these criteria have mostly been nationalistic, sometimes tinged with religion (as in the case of "Western Christian" values), secularism (as in the case of French citizenship), or even agnosticism and racism (as in the case of the "new man" of the Third Reich).[3] Without this way of getting rid of the Otherness within ourselves—an Otherness that is part of both personal identity and the identity of every modern nation-state—the dehumanization of other human beings required to commit genocide would simply not be possible. It is not at all easy to kill people we think of as belonging to our own community. It is much easier to kill or help to kill those we look on as strangers or aliens. Zygmunt Bauman has coined the term "adiaphorization" to describe insensitivity and moral indifference to the suffering of strangers—an attitude that tends to merge with negative stereotyping among the direct perpetrators.[4]

As I have pointed out elsewhere, this way of constructing identity involves several interlocking processes:

- Reduction of the multiple dimensions of identity to just one (national, religious, ethnic, or another)
- Creation of a "normal" identity, including acceptable and unacceptable forms of deviance for different categories of social actors
- Alienation and dehumanization of collective identities that fall outside the accepted limits of deviance and indifference toward the possible fate of deviants

Therefore, any attempt to tackle or prevent genocidal social practices must begin with this construction of identity and Otherness. Indeed, it is precisely these constructions that the perpetrators set out to impose, not only through terror but later through the memory of genocide in postgenocide societies. Thus, genocidal social practices will be difficult to prevent unless we question the paradigm of identity by exclusion, with its accompanying processes of normalization, alienation, dehumanization, and adiaphorization.

Similarly, perpetuating binary visions of "us" and "them" after genocide has occurred simply serves to legitimize future acts of countergenocide by the "victimized group." Israel's violations of human rights in the occupied Palestinian Territory (supposedly legitimized by the suffering of European Jews under Nazism), the terrorist attacks of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, the killings of Hutus in the Democratic Republic of Congo in revenge for the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda, the killings of Serbs in Kosovo in revenge for the murder of Kosovo Albanians, and the killing and expulsion of the German population by the Soviet Union from those areas of Eastern Europe in which the Nazis had committed atrocities are just a few examples where debates rage about who is "good" and who is "bad." Part of this binary way of thinking is that each group must be, intrinsically, either perpetrators or victims.

Types of Guilt: A Reflection on Karl Jaspers

In 1945 and 1946, during the immediate postwar period, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers gave a series of seminars that were published in 1946 under the title *Die Schuldfrage.* The first English translation was published the following year as *The Question of German Guilt.* In this work, Jaspers tried to accept and, at the same time, distinguish the different sorts of German guilt under the Nazis. He was thus confronting both the "demonization" of Germans as a whole and collective guilt, on the one hand, and German self-justification or genocide denial, on the other.

Jaspers distinguished four types of guilt: criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical. This distinction serves to highlight that responsibilities are diverse and not all actions can be judged in the same way. In Jaspers's view, criminal guilt referred to acts that violate the law (genocide, murder, torture, unlawful arrest, etc.), while political guilt referred to the degree of responsibility each citizen bore for the Nazis' rise to power and subsequent criminal actions. Political guilt depended both on the extent to which individuals agreed with Nazi policies and how effectively (or ineffectively) they had resisted them. Moral guilt referred to acts of commission or omission that facilitated or supported criminal actions. Finally, metaphysical guilt presupposed the existence of solidarity among human beings that made each individual co-responsible for all the rest. The mere fact that some had survived while others had perished

implied that one could always have done more to prevent those deaths, even giving one's own life in exchange for the lives of others.

Jaspers's four types of guilt are particularly suggestive in that each category implies a specific response. In Jaspers's view, criminal guilt can only be met with punishment; political guilt, with defeat; and moral guilt, with repentance. However, for metaphysical guilt there is no answer: we are stuck with it for the rest of our lives even when we attempt to change the workings of society in order to prevent another similar event from shocking our own spirit and the conscience of humanity. In Jaspers's view, metaphysical guilt can be removed only by God.

It is true that Jaspers's reflections of German guilt were largely ignored in postwar Germany.[5] Nevertheless, it is remarkable that no reflections of this kind have emerged in relation to genocide in Argentina. On the contrary, Decrees 157 and 158 issued by Raúl Alfonsín's government in Argentina in 1983 had the effect of confusing criminal and political guilt, by simultaneously judging those who committed political mistakes—the left-wing politico-military organizations—together with those who had used state power to commit serious human rights violations within a framework of genocide, and who were therefore criminally guilty.[6] In the 1990s, this confusion was carried to the extreme of trying to seat the criminally and morally guilty at the same table and asking them both to repent, while taking for granted that the perpetrators of criminal acts should be granted impunity. The repentance of vast sectors of the population for complicity or connivance in genocide or for ill-conceived attempts at resistance was placed at the same level as the supposed "repentance" of those who had raped, tortured, and murdered hundreds of citizens in cold blood. Thus, against all logic and decency, the perpetrators were given an equal right to speak, and even to be elected to public office.[7]

The preciseness of Jaspers's categories may help to address these problems differently. For one thing, it is very difficult for society to construct a new version of events until the question of criminal responsibility has been at least partially resolved. The repeal and annulment of the impunity laws was and still is a major step toward establishing the relative responsibilities of militants or ordinary citizens. Criminal guilt is not canceled by repentance—only by punishment. No repentance can be genuine if it represents or offers a way to escape punishment. The reopening of the cases against Héctor Julio Simón and Miguel Osvaldo Etchecolatz, for example, showed that, far from being "reconciled," society had been waiting patiently for impunity to end. It also showed that there is no other way to resolve conflicts and arguments or lay history to rest—individually and collectively—except by starting the long journey through the criminal justice system. This is the only way to apportion blame equitably for past wrongs.

True repentance comes only after justice has been done, not as a way to avoid punishment. By contrast, the "repentant" Argentine genocidaires made

their remorse known to society only as long as they were safe from punishment. As soon as they were threatened with justice, they tried to defend their crimes again, even declaring themselves willing and ready to repeat the same crimes if society insisted on bringing them to trial. On the other hand, a widespread inability to distinguish different levels of guilt and responsibility has plunged Argentine society into a "confusion" that affects our very sense of identity, both individual and collective.

Continuing with Jaspers's four categories, no one to date has admitted any *political* responsibility for genocide. On the contrary, the same members of Argentina's political parties who, at best, failed to halt the genocide—and, in many cases, were intellectual or passive accomplices thereof—have presented themselves since 1983 as the guarantors of the new "democracy." Instead of recognizing their own inadequacies, silences, or complicities—flaws which in Jaspers's view, at the very least, would disqualify them from holding political office again—these willing or unwilling collaborators in genocide entrenched themselves in the political system and, to a certain extent, in academic and intellectual circles. It has long been time for them to make way for new generations or for those who had been hounded from politics by the dictatorship,

Jaspers emphasizes primarily the moral responsibility of individual persons. Nevertheless, one cannot help noticing that most Argentineans are remarkably complacent about their own behavior during the genocide. This is true even among intellectuals and artists who are normally more self-critical.[8] Instead of exploring the question of moral responsibility, this generation regarded itself as a victim—but in an abstract sense. The victim card is the easiest one to play in a postgenocidal context because it blocks uncomfortable questions about one's own possible material and/or moral contributions to mass murder. Moreover, abstract self-victimization precludes any examination of the impact of horror on one's own perceptions of reality and ways of relating to others.

If what I have just said sounds demanding or accusatory, that is not my intention. Most Argentineans could not have done much more than they actually did. It is not part of my task to point the finger of blame or grant my own generation the right to judge the moral behavior of its predecessors. My purpose is simply to propose a new reflection about the effects of abstract and collective self-victimization on social relations. Most concentration camp survivors, however, are burdened with the guilt of having survived, and this is a guilt society reserves *for them alone.* Those who were closest to the horror—in the next bunk or in the same torture chamber—are reproached for not trading places with the victims. This reproach, however, is not made against the rest of society. Concentration camp survivors tend to be excluded from social life because "they must have done something to still be alive." But this accusation is not directed against their contemporaries who kept their heads down to escape detention.

I repeat that with this analysis of moral responsibility I do not propose to judge a generation of survivors—much less those who survived the concentration camps. But the question, as Jaspers pointed out, may allow each of us to judge him- or herself and accept the consequences of moral guilt. During the Nazi era, collaboration was often active and took the form of denouncing one's neighbors; under the dictatorship in Argentina, collaboration was more passive, with some moments of popular support for the regime during the World Cup in 1978; during the military's government's campaign "Argentinians are human and right" in 1979 (in answer to accusations of human-rights violations); during the visit of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR), also in 1979; or during the Malvinas/Falklands War in 1982, a war that had massive popular support.

In short, my aim here has been to expose the process whereby Argentine society freed itself of moral guilt by blaming those who had suffered most and by placing itself beyond good and evil as the abstract victim of two terrifying demons. I am convinced that unless we can raise these questions and—beyond asking who supported or helped the regime—accept moral responsibility for what we could have done and did not do, there will be no collective working through of the Argentine genocide. Only by facing these issues fairly and squarely can we lay to rest the horror that—whether we like it or not—changed the way members of a whole generation related to one another.

Politics and Ethics: Some Suggestions by Emmanuel Levinas

If reversing the consequences of a "reorganizing genocide" is a decidedly political act, so too is confronting the conditions that make genocide possible in the first place. It is also an ethical issue, for we are responsible for how we conceptualize our own identity and the identities of others, as well as for any limits we put on this responsibility. In this sense, the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has suggested a way of looking at this ethical dimension that is eminently political.[9]

Levinas understands Otherness as a fundamental fact of human life. But unlike more philosophical interpretations of Otherness or politically correct discourses about "respect" and "tolerance" for others, Levinas is not interested in just *any* Other, and certainly not in abstractions. On the contrary, Levinas sees the Other as the foundation of ethical life. The Other is the face of the widow, the orphan, the beggar, and the stranger—figures that come straight from the Bible. Levinas repeats these figures each time he refers to Otherness. They do not speak to us simply from the fact of their existence, but from their pain, their dispossession, their need, and a responsibility that makes us—the holders of wealth, power, knowledge, health, happiness, or whatever—guilty of the Other's suffering.

Levinas poses an asymmetrical and nonallergic relationship with Otherness. This is not just any Otherness but a "deprived" Otherness in which our responsibility for others is not balanced on their part by any responsibility toward us. There is no moral quid pro quo, and we expect nothing in return for what we do. Unlike the contractual model of ethics, which in the final analysis is based on the market metaphor, Levinasian responsibility is not guided by any expectation about the Other's past or future actions. Responsibility for others derives entirely from their dispossession or need.

This radical ethical-philosophical view of the dispossessed Other as one whose life and well-being demand our *total responsibility*, a duty of service, provides a starting point—although others are possible—for designing a policy to confront the genocidal potential that resides in every modern human being, while offering a profound way of reshaping our understanding of moral responsibility and, therefore, our own identity.

In any situation where another human being is disparaged, harassed, reviled, isolated, stigmatized, kidnapped, tortured, or killed, we have absolute and total responsibility in moral terms for that person's fate. Responsibility is shared by everybody: family members, friends, and acquaintances, but also by the witnesses of the kidnappings, the victims' neighbors, and the torturers' acquaintances. Genocidal social practices cannot develop if we move toward a moral reformulation of this type, and the concept of genocide as the partial destruction of our own national group is a crucial step in that direction. Genocides need the *active consensus* of the population through shared prejudices, or at least a *passive consensus* in the form of a numbing of moral values and indifference toward the fate of persecuted minorities (what Bauman calls adiaphorization). Rethinking our moral approach in a Levinasian sense in order to save others could jeopardize our welfare (perhaps "comfort" would be a better word) and even put our own lives at risk. However, it is one of the most promising ethical and moral strategies for challenging the growing hegemony of genocidal practices as ways of reorganizing social relations across national groups by means of terror.

Without a major transformation of our processes of identity construction, without a restatement of the limits of our responsibility for others, and without understanding that each of us is an inseparable part of any social practice prevailing in our society, and therefore morally responsible for its effects, we have no chance of banishing genocide as a tool of social engineering. This new approach is both ethical and political, and its success or failure will determine the type of society in which we and our children will live.