

Response to **Is Genocide Preventable? Some Theoretical Considerations**
Thomas Cushman

The Distinct, Complex and Ongoing Evolution of Genocide Studies

Joyce Apsel, New York University, General Studies Program
President, International Association of Genocide Scholars

First, I want to thank Jerry Fowler and the Committee on Conscience for inviting me here and to express my appreciation for the important work they are doing at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

With the submission of over 150 proposals for the Fifth Biennial Conference of the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS) to be held at the Irish Centre for Human Rights in Galway, Ireland----the conference is entitled *Genocide and the World Community: Accountability, Consequences and Prevention*--- to the recently published Pioneers of Genocide Studies (2002)¹ to the establishment of the Journal of Genocide Research (1999) and two volume Encyclopedia of Genocide (1999), Thomas Cushman's comment that genocide studies has reached a point where it is necessary to develop models for the analysis of the field itself certainly seems on point. I see people in Barnes and Noble Bookstore perusing Samantha Powers mass trade book on genocide² and recall a graduate student last year at a London conference asking whether I thought genocide studies would be a good career move. In large part due to the targeted killings in the final decades of the twentieth century, yes, genocide studies has come of age, with all the ironies and challenges that characterization reflect.

Thomas Cushman points out that genocide is not an entity simply waiting to be understood and further that the way people approach genocide is embedded in a variety of personal, ideological and disciplinary dispositions. In fact, it would be valuable if Professor Cushman revised the characterization of genocide studies as a

branch of Holocaust studies and looked more at the distinct personal and historical context out of which genocide studies scholars and teachers emerged. Of course, genocide scholars have been greatly influenced by study of the Holocaust and certain scholars early on such as Norman Cohn, Richard Rubinstein, and Raul Hilberg were important intellectual influences. Further, many scholars had family members killed in the Nazi genocide, beginning of course with Raphael Lemkin who created the term and lobbied for the creation of an international law against this crime. Other scholars and teachers were themselves refugees of Nazi Europe or child survivors (Henry Huttenbach, Robert Melson, Kurt Jonassohn, and Erwin Staub). Interest in the Holocaust from scholarship to memoirs and memorials heightened interest in and rediscovery of and resistance to denial of other genocidal events in history.

There were no courses labeled Genocide studies or Holocaust studies just as there were no courses in women studies, labor studies or ethnic studies, until the transformation of the curriculum in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The development of ethnic studies and critical re-examination of U.S. and world history, from indigenous peoples to slavery and imperialism world-wide, all contributed to uncovering the history of atrocity and its denial past and ongoing. Genocide studies had to create its own models and discourse struggling (and often times meeting resistance and anger) to go beyond the hegemonic (and unique and uniquely unique arguments and emerging institutions) and existent structures, while at the same time rooted in each scholar/teacher's own particularity and influenced by the hegemonic model. Genocide studies courses in the 1970s (and they were few in number) analyzed the Armenian and Cambodian Genocides but most of the courses focused on the Holocaust and clearly the preponderance of

courses offered on genocide studied the Holocaust. Many early scholars in the field are from Jewish, Armenian and generally North American/European and Judeo-Christian background. For example, in Pioneers of Genocide Studies, there are no scholars of African or Asian background and genocide studies developed within a primarily Western, Judeo-Christian culture. I also suggest that issues of colonization, decolonization and recolonization (as Mahmoud Mamdani refers to these processes in When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda) need to be explored to understand the lack of participating voices from Africa and Asia. Also, the experiences of Leo Kuper, Robert Melson, Rene Lemarchand, Helen Fein and Ben Kiernan for example in Africa or Asia were central influences on their areas of interest and writings and the development of the genocide studies discourse. There are also scholars who work in the field who are not formally associated with the IAGS and critical of what they see as its definitionalism, western-bias and other limitations. Scholars such as Ward Churchill in his work on indigenous peoples and scholarship from Asia and Africa increasingly add a critical perspective to the genocide studies discourse. Early on, different individuals from particular intellectual, personal and historical experiences found themselves reaching similar conclusions about the need to study and compare historic atrocity in the form of genocides.

One of the central assumptions of genocide studies is to move beyond ghettoization of victimization and to study the larger patterns and processes of destruction. Like the prevention discourse, this model discourse has been reflected more in the conversation and goals about genocide studies than in practice. Hence, most scholarship in genocide studies is not focused on prevention. However, prevention has

been an ongoing theme from Leo Kuper (The Prevention of Genocide, 1985) and the writings of Israel Charny such as How Can We Commit the Unthinkable?: Genocide, the Human Cancer(1982). Thomas Cushman refers to an early warning system model and the minorities at risk project in the research of Barbara Harff and Ted Gurr. Recent works include the late Neal Riemer's conference and collection of participants' essays: Protection against Genocide: Mission Impossible?(1999) and John Heidenrich's How to Prevent Genocide: A Guide for Policymakers, Scholars and the Concerned Citizen (2001). Samantha Power in her book America and the Age of Genocide (2002) also addresses the issue of prevention. It would be of great value if the prevention and peacebuilding discourses of for example The Carnegie Commission as articulated in David A. Hamburg's No More Killing Field: Preventing Deadly Conflict (2002) and genocide studies scholars were able to more directly and frequently benefit from each others different analyses and perspectives, and this forum is providing a valuable opportunity to do so.

It is revealing that of over 150 proposals submitted for the IAGS Conference scheduled for June 2003 there were only five papers submitted directly on the topic of prevention and one was authored by Barbara Harff. However, from education to international tribunals, prevention is a connecting theme in many of the proposals. Collections such as Chalk and Jonassohn's History and Sociology of Genocide mentioned in Thomas Cushman's paper and Totten, Parsons and Charny's Century of Genocide, which includes histories and eyewitness accounts, provide valuable materials in recovering the voices and history of targeted groups; but they do not provide a comparative model qua model. Robert Melson's comparative analysis of the Armenian

Genocide and the Holocaust analyzing war, revolution and genocide represents to my mind the most rigorous social scientific comparative analysis in one text.³ .

It seems to me there is some link between the genocide studies discourse that emphasizes comparative analysis and prevention and the fact that much of the scholarship has been focused on particular genocides sometimes with a comparative overlay or extension; and very few scholars have proposed analytic studies of prevention. My point is that there is a disconnectedness between the ideals/goals of comparative analysis and prevention and in fact accountability as well and the amount of scholarship which actually directly engages in these goals. It is not by chance that the By-Laws of the International Association of Genocide Scholars states as its purpose: “The IAGS is an organization designed to further research and teaching on the causes, parameters and effects of genocide and **advance policy studies on prevention and intervention** (italics added) .”⁴ Advancing those policy studies has clearly been among the most difficult, ongoing challenges to date.

In fact study of genocide was rooted in a conscious rejection by a minority, sometimes harshly criticized and attacked, band of scholars who refused to accept the hegemonic Holocaust model or accepted its hegemony but also the need to study other cases; and also were committed for the most part to a multidisciplinary study. Hence, while trained in a particular discipline, particularly sociology, history and political science, early scholars and teachers of genocide studies were mavericks in trying to go beyond the given paradigms and constraints of thinking about particular events of historic atrocity and of emphasizing the need to study and compare and contrast patterns and processes of human destructiveness and their implications. Barbara Harff recalls that in

1981 at the International Studies Association meeting a panel of five people attracted an audience of two; one of whom left before the panel started.⁵ She goes on to point out that a well-known scholar...”jokingly said that if I were to insist on pursuing a career researching genocide, my gravestone would read ‘Here lies a promising scholar.’”⁶ Other scholars were focused on uncovering and revealing historic atrocities such as the Armenian “massacres,” past and ongoing destruction of indigenous peoples, the man-made famine in the Ukraine or targeting of Romani by the Nazis.

Genocide scholars often have direct encounters with survivors or are themselves or have family or community members who are survivors of mass destruction; hence, personal encounter is an element. Sometimes, they had to create their own institutions and networks. For example, Israel Charny ,who published the Internet on the the Holocaust and Genocide (1985-1995), and organized the first international conference on the Holocaust and Genocide and edited the Encyclopedia of Genocide. At the 2001 IAGS conference he discussed how he ran his Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide in Jerusalem on a shoe-string budget largely from his home and encouraged those in the audience without institutional support to follow his lead.⁷ There were and are to my knowledge no chairs in Genocide Studies and for those scholars/teachers fortunate enough to get full-time teaching positions first they got their tenure and then they were able to pursue their interest in studying mass destruction. Beginning with Raphael Lemkin who had a string of part-time teaching appointments to Helen Fein and Craig Etcheson many dedicated scholars have never had full time teaching positions; some have had little substantive institutional support but continued to pursue their scholarship and activism in the field. Many scholars and teachers including Leo Kuper were activists

whose scholarship continued to be informed by their work ranging from political action to public education. The evolution of genocide as a field of study was also a product of rewriting the curriculum and larger social and political events in the 1960s and 1970s. Hence, part of the discourse of prevention Professor Cushman writes about comes out of this commingling of discovery scholarship, teaching and activism (either against denial, for equality, work with refugees) along with a particular sensibility or experience as witness to or object of discrimination or denial. (In Pioneers of Genocide Studies see the personal histories of Leo Kuper, Israel Charny, Helen Fein, Roger Smith, Richard Hovannisian, Kurt Jonassohn, Herb Hirsch, Henry Huttenbach and others). Hence, genocide studies and the discourse of prevention for these individuals came out of a deep rooted commitment to social justice and working toward a more equitable society. Their real life experience with injustice combined with the ongoing study of genocidal atrocity runs counter to Thomas Cushman's assertion that "prevention in some systematic way is more problematic than most people who work in the field would like to think."

Professor Cushman correctly points out that a discourse of prevention has been inherent in genocide studies to date stemming from a post-Enlightenment ameliorative perspective. However, that is only a partial explanation. Studying and teaching about genocide is an enormously difficult, at times painful undertaking. Based on several surveys I conducted in preparation for editions of Teaching about Genocide⁸, some teachers respond that neither they nor their students experience any particular emotional difficulty with the subject matters. Most teacher responses discussed the challenge of teaching about mass destruction including emotional responses they and their students experience.⁹ Some of those who immerse themselves day in and day out in study and

writing of the history of mass destruction psychologically need and rely on the moral and emotional compass of possibility of prevention and accountability to continue their work. Depression, anxiety, numbing and nightmare are no more uncommon to teachers and scholars of genocide than they are to their students (see survey results in my “Introduction” to Teaching About Genocide). Hence, on one level, the prevention discourse serves as a mechanism of coping for the individuals involved and for the society they are part of. But, on another level, scholars of genocide grapple with the unfolding, variety of regress within the supposed progress of modernity ; they uncover and face recurrent patterns and human destructiveness in so many cultures and varieties from machete to gun to killing factory and torture That this sensibility...moral and psychological is embedded in part in what Professor Cushman describes as post-Enlightenment ameliorative viewpoint does not mean that at the same time criticisms, reservations and skepticism of modernity do not also exist.

Both Lemkin’s coining of the term “genocide” and the study of the Nazi genocide raised interest and awareness of this ancient crime as did the colonization and decolonization processes with their inherent racism, violence, and mixture of themes of destructiveness and liberation. Cambodia was a watershed event for genocide scholars in the 1970s; Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s not only for genocide scholars but also for a group of young journalists and humanitarian aid workers. Moreover, politics and the modern state continually impact on genocide studies from the Reagan doctrine and Guatemalan genocide to questioning what is or is not included under the rubric of genocide studies. There has been a new direction in the last decades of

linkage between genocide studies and human rights reflected in books and courses offered.

Let me comment on an aspect of Professor Cushman's analysis of contingency, modernity and genocide prevention. As in most matters of human experience, prevention strategies are complex and need human imagination and ingenuity among other things to be effective. One example of genocide prevention occurred following the 1978 Iranian Revolution when about 350,000 Bahai living in Iran were being discriminated, devalued, killed and targeted for elimination¹⁰. The international network that was set up to counter and stop the killings included professional advice by a public relations firm, contacts with government figures, press and human rights organization. The Bahai were told not to use the word genocide and did not; instead using terms such as discrimination and gross human rights violations. "Because the Bahai community in US is so small those in Congress who supported Bahais have done so without political benefit; "theirs has been a human response to suffering that has brought out the best in everyone."¹¹ Hence, through an international network which applied political pressure, the Iranian government did not carry through its plans against the Bahai; revolution and later war did not serve as a cover to eliminate through killing an unwanted minority. For a variety of reasons including the successful lobbying by Bahais internationally, the Iranian government decided that the "calculus of genocide" pointed to not pursuing elimination by killing of this minority. From this example, it seems to me that the complexity of modern states and the different levers that can be pushed to stopping a genocide need further exploration. I concur to some extent with Professor Cushman's observation that: "The genocidal process is somewhat anarchic and it may be that more anarchic, less decentralized means of

combating it must be developed.” Planning and targeting of particular victims is integral to genocide; however, the anarchic qualities which also unfold as the killing process is being planned and as it proceeds may provide an entry point for reanalysis of prevention strategies.

The Harff and Gurr paper referred to by Thomas Cushman’s is one model that has been debated and discussed among scholars. I would suggest that what is needed is to encourage more projects like that of minorities at risk. Further, one of the weaknesses of genocide studies has been its lack of precision in terms of numbers. Part of this is a product of the difficulty of getting accurate numbers; but also politicalization of the numbers killed and failure to more rigorously scrutinize sources. Herb Spierer who has extensively written about this subject, taught a generation of students at the Columbia Human Rights Centre about the necessity of statistical analysis for human rights work; and conducted with other social scientists quantitative analysis of for example, State Violence in Guatemala, 1960-1966. This analysis resulted in demonstrating that the killings in Guatemala targeted indigenous peoples and contributed to the government acknowledgment that a genocide was carried out. The report uses “statistics together with historical analysis to tell the story of state violence in Guatemala. Number and graphs help establish who the victims were, how they were killed, when they were killed and who killed them.” More projects like this are crucial for accountability, recognition and to some extent for the surviving community members. Whether or not such reports can or have contributed to prevention of recurrence of genocide in specific communities or areas needs to be explored.

Professor Cushman writes that “scholars have been more hesitant to make such an

explicit linkage between genocide more generally and modernity....because the more a project is defined primarily in positive terms: the negative consequences of modernity are hard to conceptualize....” It seems to me this is not the case and the link between modernity and genocide has been implicit and explicit in genocide studies as has been its recurrent nature. For example, two early works such as Irving Louis Horowitz’s Taking Lives: Genocide and State Power (1976; now in its 6th printing) in its title as well as content has a chapter on Bureaucracy and State Power and Helen Fein’s Accounting for Genocide (1982) includes analysis of state elites and a “calculus of genocide” are representative of analysis of the modern state, its structure and how it serves as an engine to accelerate destruction of its own peoples. Michael Dobkowski and Isidor Walliman reiterate in the Introduction to The Coming Age of Scarcity what they stated in the first edition in 1988; ...that we can no longer conceive of genocide and mass deaths “as random and rare historic phenomenon.” In 2002, Alex Hinton in his introductory essay “The Dark Side of Modernity: Toward an anthropology of Genocide” in Annihilating Difference, The Anthropology of Genocide asserts that genocide is intimately linked to the dilemmas of modernity...and goes on to try to define modernities; several essays emphasize the diverse connections with modernity; including part one: Modernity’s edges: Genocide and Indigenous Peoples.

Professor Cushman’s use of modernity and what he describes as its insidious and discordant repercussions on genocide in fact has been the subject of genocide and human rights discourses. For example, there is an increasing discussion of how humanitarianism can work toward doing no harm rather than the earlier premise of doing good and most recently powerfully documented and analyzed in Fiona Terry’s *Condemned to Repeat?*

the Paradox of Humanitarian Action. Professor Cushman concludes that “within the human rights community we must invariably ask ourselves about our own role in facilitating that which we despise.” Despite their strong personalities and differences, the networks of genocide studies scholars remain remarkably supportive of one another; in part, because they understand the difficulty, moral quandaries and implications their individual and combined research and teaching entails and repeatedly encounter denial on many levels.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that there are a variety of discourses going on simultaneously and on different levels, interpenetrating, distinct, monologues, dialogues, a cacophony. The positive ameliorist one that Thomas Cushman emphasizes but at the same time the recurrent comparative one and the grappling with the “reality” of the enormous, modern continuum of destruction and human suffering to name only three. That reality is tremendously difficult to grasp. I think of Descartes in his Meditations pointing out that we can create a chiliasm; 1000 sided figure; it looks very much like a circle. However, we can not image/ imagine that 1000 sides figure in the same way we can comprehend in our mind what a triangle is.

Those of us who attempt to teach and study about the range and recurrence of genocide (not “anomaly of anomalies” as Professor Cushman writes) on various levels examine, explore, write about and deliver responses to papers such as **Is Genocide Preventable?** But to imagine, comprehend the enormity is in certain ways impossible for us to image/imagine; perhaps too painful for us to psychologically withstand; it may be the case that image/imagining the prevention strategy is at times so as well. But in order

to keep teaching and studying the subject, I feel compelled as clearly many of my colleagues do, to face the long odds, but to continue to try.

¹ Samuel Totten and Steven Leonard Jacobs, eds., Pioneers of Genocide Studies (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002)

² Samantha Power, 'A Problem from Hell' America and the Age of Genocide, (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

³ Robert Melson, Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁴ "By-Laws of the International Association of Genocide Scholars," Mimeographed Copy.

⁵ Barbara Harff, "A German Born Genocide Scholar," in Pioneers of Genocide Studies, p. 103.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Israel Charny's remarks were made in a roundtable discussion on Holocaust/Genocide Centers and their challenges at The Fourth Biennial Conference of the Association of Genocide Scholars, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2001.

⁸ See "Teaching about Genocide" in Joyce Freedman-Apsel and Helen Fein, eds., Teaching about Genocide (Human Rights Internet: 1995). See also additional teacher comments based on an updated survey in "Teaching about Genocide" by Joyce Apsel in Apsel and Fein, eds., Teaching about Genocide (Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Assn. 2002). The course syllabi in the editions changed markedly; the 2002 syllabi reflect the increasing direction of linkage between genocide studies and human rights courses.

⁹ I am not advocating a "touchy-feely" approach at all and have written about the problems of what I refer to as "not a tear was dry pedagogy." See Joyce Apsel, "Looking Backward and forward: Genocide Studies and Teaching about the Armenian Genocide", in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., Confronting the Armenian Genocide: Look Backward, Moving Forward (Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick, 2003), p. 194.

¹⁰ Katherine Bigelow, in Genocide Watch, ed. Helen Fein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Ibid.