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Is Genocide Preventable? Some Theoretical Considerations(1)

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Preventionism in Genocide Studies

Since World War II, the field of genocide studies has evolved as an interdisciplinary and scholarly field in its own right. As an autonomous intellectual field, genocide studies has reached a point where it is necessary to develop models for the analysis of the field itself. In addition to studying the phenomenon of genocide, we need also to study the study of genocide. The guiding theoretical spirit of such a task comes from the sociology of knowledge, which sees knowledge of genocide as a cultural production of various scholars with particular world-views, biographies, ideological dispositions, and material interests, networks of attachment, all which shape and influence the structure of what we know about genocide. This is not to say, of course, that genocide is a social construction. It is all too real, which is the very *raison d'être* for genocide studies in the first place. The production of knowledge, however, about it is fundamentally a social process. Genocide is an objective reality, but it is one which people approach with a variety of personal, ideological and disciplinary dispositions which shape what we know about this all-too-real phenomenon. A mark of maturity in the development of a field of study is when those who work within the field engage in reflexive projects, by casting a critical eye not just on the phenomena they study, but on themselves as active producers of knowledge.

This essay represents a first step toward what might be called “the sociology of genocide studies.” While there are many things about the organization of the field that one could focus on, I offer here an analysis of the idea of prevention in genocide studies. I offer some theoretical and empirical reflections on the problems and prospects of the prevention of genocide in the early twenty-first century.

While scholars in the field vary in their theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of genocide, even a cursory glance at the field indicates that there is a strong and widely shared belief in which holds that: 1. Genocide is preventable and 2. that a fundamental goal of genocide studies is to offer understandings of genocide which will be useful and, indeed, necessary for the prevention of genocide. Theories of genocide are, implicitly and explicitly, linked to the practice of prevention. Genocide studies is not like “pure science”, which is generally “disinterested.” Rather, it is characterized by a strong ideological belief that genocide is preventable and that knowledge about genocide will help bring about prevention. This belief in prevention, I refer to as *preventionism*. It is a fundamental ideology within genocide studies, one which offers legitimacy and relevance to the field and offers a certain political legitimacy for the field. Preventionism is not limited to genocide studies: it is an ideology which pervades the liberal project of modernity and the social sciences which are part of that project. The fundamental assumption underlying the modern project is the idea of social progress and betterment through knowledge and understanding. Indeed, preventionism is an ideology which has provided legitimacy to social

science since the earliest of times: knowledge of society produced through scientific inquiry is the first step in the prevention or amelioration of social problems.

As a mental experiment to indicate the prevalence of preventionism in genocide studies, one might consider what the likelihood of finding someone within the genocide studies who studied genocide purely for the scientific satisfaction of knowing about it. Indeed, in almost all significant works on genocide, there is an implicit or explicit idea that perhaps the central purpose of understanding genocide is to try to prevent it. Preventionism is a kind of shared language, or in Ludwig Wittgenstein's terms, a "language game" which identifies and unifies people within the field. As such, a commitment to prevention is probably as important for status within the field as various kinds of disciplinary expertise and credentials. By seeing preventionism as a kind of language, I do not mean to infer that the unifying function of the language of prevention presupposes some kind of solidarity or agreement about how to prevent genocide. Indeed, as we have seen in recent years in the case of Bosnia, Kosovo, and now the American war on terrorism, there are rather stark differences in approaches to prevention ranging from those who advocate non-violent approaches to those who argue that prevention must come from military intervention. While the arguments over exactly how to prevent genocide exist, there is general agreement and consensus on the basic fact that genocide can and must be prevented and that the production of a particular kind of scientific knowledge about genocide is fundamentally related to that task.

My general aim in this essay is twofold. First, I wish to make explicit the connections between the ways in which we currently understand genocide and the task of preventing it. In doing so, I will argue that the effort to prevent genocide relies primarily on positivistic, naturalistic and deterministic models of genocide which miss some of the most important aspects of genocide as it appears in modern social conditions: its contingency, unpredictability, and its status as a product of human agency. By way of that, my second task is to problematize the idea of the preventability of genocide in the particular historical epoch in which we live. While the belief in the preventability of social ills is itself a product of the modernity, modernity is also characterized by various social and cultural forces which mitigate against the prevention of genocide and which have actually facilitated it. The main body of this essay is to outline those aspects of modernity which mitigate against prevention of genocide and facilitate its occurrence. By way of that, I want to argue that those who wish to prevent genocide also need to develop a theory of genocide which is, at the same time, a theory of modernity.

Because my argument is a central challenge to an orthodox belief in genocide studies – indeed, if what I say about preventionism as a unifying language is true than this paper is, from the outset, a form of heresy - I would like to be clear about a few things. First, and most importantly, my aim is not to argue that genocide is unpreventable. To argue that point would be to succumb to a kind of pessimistic determinism that would virtually ensure that genocide would continue. Rather, I want to argue that its prevention in some systematic way is

more problematic than most people who work in the field would like to think.

Second, the understanding put forward here is not meant to insinuate that there is no relation between knowledge of genocide and its prevention. Rather, my purpose is to show that our knowledge about genocide needs to be expanded to include more consideration of human agency and the social structure of modernity than is currently present in the field of genocide studies and, in particular, those works which have as their main aim the prevention of genocide.

Most theories of genocide are ahistorical and attempt to posit some general “essence “ of genocide which persists across time and space. My argument is that theories of how and why genocides occur happens, or how future genocides may be prevented, must always be looked at in relation to the specific historical epochs in which they occur. Knowing, for instance, how genocide has occurred in, say, the ancient world or in pre-modern Europe may have little to do with understanding it in the present, since the stage upon which genocide occurs is vastly different and fundamentally altered by modernity (2). The massacre of the Melosians by the Athenians, of which Thucydides wrote, proceeded according to quite a different “cultural logic” than the massacres of people in the 20th century: we can never lose sight of the fact that the twentieth century is, simultaneously, characterized by the development of modernity as well as the development of the most heinous forms of genocide. If we are interested in how genocide occurs now and how it might occur in the future, our theories need to reflect a deeper understanding of the particular historical period of “late modernity” that we live in now and how aspects of later modernity facilitate and foster genocide.

Finally, I should point out that I share the assumption that genocide is preventable in some cases. I do not think it is preventable in all cases, nor do I think it is sociologically astute to believe – for either theoretical or historical reasons – that we have moved beyond the actuality of genocide and that it would be naïve to assume that it will not occur in the future. Like Immanuel Kant, I accept the “depravity of man” as a constant force that must be contended with, even as we aim to counter that depravity with various plans for “perpetual peace” (3). I am less optimistic – for theoretical and empirical reasons – that this depravity is as ameliorable as Kant felt it to be, especially since I do not believe that our reason is as powerful as we imagine it to be.

Admittedly, there is some degree of realism and pessimism in this prognostication. It is impressive that scholars remain so committed to the optimistic idea of prevention in spite of the perennial occurrence of genocide. In spite of the strength of the effort to prevent genocide, though, the phenomenon of genocide has continued and even intensified in recent years. Indeed, the 1990s, a period of rapid growth of the “genocide prevention industry”, was the period in which two major genocides occurred in Bosnia and Rwanda. The severity of those genocides - especially the Rwandan one – stands out in stark relief to the discourse of prevention, which also intensified during this period. Upon reflection, more than ten years after the Bosnian genocide it now appears that there was virtually no relationship between what we knew, or our desire to prevent it and the actual conduct on the ground. Indeed, in retrospect, it now appears that more knowledge of the event actually might have had something to

do with facilitating and exacerbating genocide than if we had not known that much at all, a point to which I will return later. The same could be said for the Rwandan genocide: all the indicators of an impending genocide were known by political actors, but the genocide still proceeded. The frustration which is often expressed in the writings of those who aimed to prevent genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda is due to the recognition that the sphere of knowledge and the urgent desire to prevent genocide seemed to be separated from the sphere of political means and practices which could have halted the mass-killing. Indeed, the very instrument of “perpetual peace”, the United Nations, not only was not effective in preventing genocide, but actually aided and abetted it. Other phenomena of modernity – instantaneous communication, the deployment of intellectual experts, sophisticated weaponry, techniques of political negotiation just to name a few -- were not put into the service of prevention_of genocide, but were actually used to facilitate it.

For most people who wish to prevent genocide, the key variable in genocide is the lack of political will on the part of those who have the power to stop genocide. To be sure, all genocide could be prevented if, for instance, the United States declared that its policy would be to intervene with military force in any case where the “experts” tell us there is an impending genocide. From a social science standpoint, the reduction of failure to prevent genocide to the amorphous variable of “lack of political will” is insufficient. Such an explanation imagines that something called “political will” is able to harness all of the competing forces of modernity and to move history according to its dictates. It

misses the central point that the failure of political will is, itself, explainable by the various aspects of modern culture which I shall lay out in this essay. The point is this: the hiatus between our rhetorical expressions of prevention and the actual practice is vast and this hiatus is not able to be closed simply by getting our politics in the right place. It is much more complicated than that.

Whither Preventionism?

Why do vast numbers of people believe that the worst behaviors of human beings, such things as genocide, torture, enslavement, etc. can be alleviated or abolished? In perusing the course of human history, the idea that such things could be prevented would seem counterintuitive or counterfactual. No rational person would think it possible to prevent earthquakes or tornadoes. Yet in the realm of human phenomena, it seems to be precisely the opposite. The worse the phenomena, the more people seem to mobilize to prevent it and the more urgent the discourse of prevention seems to become.

Deviant behavior, violence, evil, wickedness have been with us since the beginning, but it is only recently in human history that people have come to believe that the latter are eradicable and preventable. This belief is grounded in the Enlightenment idea that the purpose of human knowledge is to ameliorate social ills and advance the human condition. The intellectual efforts of Immanuel Kant, who was the embodiment of the Enlightenment attitude of “knowledge for progress,” aimed to make the world a better place, a world of “perpetual peace” (although it is interesting to note that after such utopian dreaming, Kant came at

the end of his life to a more realist and pessimistic view of human nature and the possibilities of perpetual peace) (4). In some senses, Kant might be considered the first and even the greatest of practitioners of human rights, since his efforts were geared not just toward understanding, but laid out a specific political strategy for the prevention of evil and the advancement of the good. The task for Kant, as it is for us now, is how to get the politicians to take heed of what philosophers (and in the present, social scientists) have to say. Kant's experience illustrates the central paradox that I am exploring here: how to move from understanding to practice, or how to translate our knowledge of what constitutes a good society to the actual constitution of the good society? It is painfully clear that the idealism of Kant's *Perpetual Peace* fell flat against the political realities and was unrealizable in the face of them and we are still faced with to this day with the fundamental Kantian paradox of how to move from the conceptualization of the good, and the understanding of evil to practice.

At base, the Kantian idea that knowledge would inherently lead to social progress was one of the dominant ideas of the Enlightenment and served as the basis for the foundation of the social sciences. Auguste Comte's positivism posited the new science of sociology as a means toward social perfection. The positivist motto, *Savoir pour prévoir et prévoir pour pouvoir* -- "knowledge for prediction, prediction for power -- reflects this Enlightenment belief in the logical connection between theory and practice almost perfectly. Scientific knowledge of society would allow social guardians to predict social outcomes and to exert power and control over the world. One can see in this ethos the very beginnings

of prevention discourse which immediately becomes part of all organized attempts to understand violations of human rights: if we can understand and predict, say, genocide or torture or war, we can use that understanding as a form of power to intervene and prevent these things from happening. Our knowledge becomes a form of power over the world, and the essence of that power is the ability to prevent that which we do not want to have power over us. From the time of Comte onward, this narrative, which imagines that our knowledge is necessarily a form of progressive power over the world, is evident in virtually every field of human inquiry. The narrative embodies the idea of progress that embodies a basic telos of human history, that advancement of human knowledge will advance the human species so that, eventually, the good society will emerge.

There are at least two problematic aspects of this vision. The first has to do with the positivist ontology which underlies it. It assumes that social life is determined by certain kinds of intractable or natural “laws” and that if we know these laws, then we can intervene to change the course of human history. Positivism, as a scientific viewpoint, aims to “freeze” the social world into categories and variables which eliminate contingency and indeterminacy and human agency from the picture. The second problem has to do with the complexity of how we get from knowledge to power. For Comte and other positivists, enlightened rulers would recognize the laws of society and then engage in organized efforts to guide and steer society. In Comte’s view, rulers were something like applied sociologists who simply translated science and theory into practice to make a better world. In Comte’s view, the answer was that

the sociologists should take over and plan the good society. But being that this was then and is now an absolute impossibility, we are still left with the problem of how to get from knowing to the point of exerting power over human imperfection and evil through the act of prevention.

Genocide Studies and the Discourse of Prevention

The acceleration of the human rights movement from the 1990s until the present has been characterized by an increase in the production of knowledge about human rights and an expansion of the ideology of preventionism. Nowhere is this prevention talk more in evidence than in the rise of the field of “genocide studies”. Genocide is as old as human history, but the field of genocide studies did not emerge until after World War II. Genocide studies is really the outgrowth of the study of the Holocaust. The efforts to understand the Holocaust which emerged after World War II eventually led to interest in recovering memories of and naming earlier genocides (the Armenian genocide, for instance, which had been buried by the experience of the Holocaust), developing theoretical and conceptual knowledge about genocide, and studying post-war genocides. The phrase “Never Again” which is invoked with regard to the Holocaust embodies in crystalline form the preventative discourse which is at the center of Holocaust studies. It embodies the idea that the purpose of studying the Holocaust is to prevent a repetition of that event and, more generally, other genocides. This preventative thrust radiated out from Holocaust studies to the study of other genocides and from its very inception, genocide

studies was seen as a means not only of understanding genocide, but of exerting some element of control over it. There is, of course, the tired and pointless debate about the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust which still, to some extent, is omnipresent in the field. But regardless of how one stands in that debate, the prevention of mass killing is one of the highest values in the field.

This impulse to prevention was embodied in the very task of conceptualizing genocide, which was undertaken initially by the Polish jurist Raphael Lemkin. Lemkin's pioneering work aimed to name the phenomenon which had occurred throughout history and in a particularly gruesome way in World War II (5). It is important to stress that Lemkin's work to name and conceptualize the phenomenon of genocide was an the first step in preventing and punishing it – the act of prevention could not proceed without naming it and without knowledge of it and it is rather clear from Lemkin's work that he recognized this. The very title and organization of the book in which he coined the term indicates this: *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation - Analysis of Government - Proposals for Redress*. Analysis is the first step in redress. Lemkin's work was a crucial step in the development not only of genocide studies, but also concrete practical plans to prevent it. The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1948 was a direct practical result of Lemkin's pioneering work, a preventative measure which depended fundamentally on his analytical study and naming of the crime. It is notable that the Genocide Convention, in practical terms, has done little to solve

the problem of genocide. It is an example of a modernist, progressive ideology that has fallen flat against the realities of modernity itself.

Lemkin's impulse to crystallize an understanding of genocide as a step toward its prevention remains an integral part of both the theoretical and practical side of the genocide studies project. The idea of prevention of genocide could not exist until the phenomenon was named as such and understood in several crucial dimensions. In the emergence of the discourse on genocide which followed, there is virtually no serious study which is separated from the discourse of prevention. The impulse, either overtly in the titles of the works, or the texts themselves refer directly to prevention and see prevention as the desired ideal of intellectual inquiry. This progression is evident in the work of pioneers of genocide studies such as Leo Kuper. Kuper's work *Genocide: It's Political Use in the Twentieth Century* outlines a general understanding of the causes of genocide, followed by an imagining of the "non-genocidal society" which is to come about, presumably, by virtue of our understanding of the causes of genocide (6). This work was followed by a work entitled *The Prevention of Genocide* which outlines specific strategies by which the United Nations can prevent genocide and guarantee the right to life (in light of the ways in which the UN seemed to foster the conditions which led to genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda, Kuper's faith in the prevention of genocide by the U.N appears prosaic at best) (7). This is quite simply the transposition of Kant's idea of perpetual peace to the phenomenon of genocide: whereas Kant wanted a society free of

the depravity of war, Kuper wants a society free of genocide. Each is a utopian vision.

Kuper's work is just one example of the assumption running through the entire field of genocide studies that the pursuit of knowledge about genocide is a direct precondition for the prevention of genocide. This is a continuous trend from the birth of genocide studies right up to the very present. It is virtually impossible to find a major work in the field that does not invoke the discourse of prevention as either a proposed outcome of the research or a legitimation for the study of genocide more generally. To offer a sense of how this discourse appears in the present, consider some of the articles which have appeared in the *Journal of Genocide Research*, a major new periodical of record which is one of the most expansive and serious journals in the field of genocide studies. These examples, taken quite randomly, illustrate how preventative discourse manifests itself in respectable peer-reviewed scholarship, in some cases by pioneers in the field. In an article by Christian P. Scherrer, the author, who offers observations on the development of a theory of genocide, notes that: "Comparative genocide research has attracted more scholars during the last decade. Appropriate approaches should try to realize a balanced relationship combining two spheres of research. However, there are only very few research projects operating on a larger scale with the object of relating the development of theoretical findings with empirical studies and vice-versa. **Only then can one begin to talk about early warning, genocide prevention, and peacebuilding** (8). In another article on Rwanda, the author worries not only about Rwanda, but about the possibility of

genocide in the Congo, ending the article with the ritual invocation of the ideology of preventionism: “Rwanda may be sliding into a wide-scale war, the cycle of violence may be continuing; **this time what is essential is that the international community act on its obligation to prevent crimes of genocide** (9). Interestingly, in one clause, this statement invokes two powerful narratives: the narrative of prevention and the narrative of “the international community”, which is, presumably, to be the instrument by which we move from knowledge to prevention (the very idea of an international community, of course, presupposes a common normative framework which does not exist). A third example: in an article about genocide and gender, the author ends the article with the following phrase: **“The future of genocide remains to be written unless states and peoples are convinced that it can be stopped.** It is not enough to say ‘Never again’ again, for it has happened again and again” (10). It is hard to think of any human social phenomenon of a general nature that has not happened again and again: murder, war, etc. What is interesting in this passage is the firm idea that genocide is eradicable, while at the same its occurrence is something which is held to be ubiquitous and perennial throughout history.

Passages such as these do not seem to indicate any concrete processes or mechanisms for how the knowledge presented in the essay is to be realized in a policy of prevention. Mainly, they are rhetorical expressions of ideological commitment to the idea of prevention to genocide. They serve the ritual function of uniting like-minded people in the pursuit of a noble practical effort. They express a lament about the persistence of genocide, even as they dream of

liberation from it. There is, though, a rather glaring discrepancy between such ritual statements and the magnitude and complexity of the phenomenon of genocide itself. Such accounts specify in incredible detail the specific aspects of genocide and specify genocide as a remarkably durable phenomenon, but at the same time imagine it to be eradicable. There is a rather stark disjunction between the high quality of the knowledge presented, in some cases knowledge which offers deep understandings of the phenomenon of genocide across time and space, and the simplicity of the statements about prevention. The knowledge is serious and scientific, the prevention discourse symbolic, eidetic, and performative precisely because knowledge about what genocide is and how and why it occurs is quite a different thing than knowledge about how to prevent it. Laments about genocide's perenniality and expressions of faith in its preventability embody the Enlightenment/positivist idea of "knowledge as progress," the idea that knowing is necessarily connected to doing ("doing" in this case being prevention).

These points are made not to expose genocide scholars as naifs, but to bring to relief what I see as a strong "domain assumption" in genocide studies that an increase in understanding will lead to greater prospects for prevention (11). I believe that this assumption, while particularly strong in genocide studies, is evident as well in virtually all aspects of the study and practice of human rights. As a comparison case, one could, for instance, look at the literature on torture which, as with genocide studies, proceeds from the assumption that to understand torture is to make a positive step to alleviate it. Notwithstanding the

fact that there is little agreement about how to even define torture, it is not clear that either knowledge about torture or concrete preventative measures against torture have actually alleviated the practice of torture to any significant degree in the modern world. In fact, in some cases, knowledge about torture often allows torturers to practice their craft with more efficiency or to escape detection.

Practical Applications of Preventionism

If it is the case that many major works of genocide pay homage to the idea of prevention, it would be unfair to characterize the whole field as one which remains at the ideological level. In fact, the situation is quite the opposite. The belief in the preventability of genocide has spawned a litany of works which specifically outline the steps which could be taken to prevent genocide. What is most notable about these “practical projects” is how they conceive of genocide. For the most part, the theoretical model of genocide upon which such works are based is a positivistic or naturalistic. Roughly, the logic is as follows: Through empirical and scientific observation of operationally defined cases of genocide, we can isolate the variables and causal mechanisms at work and predict future genocides before they occur. Armed with such predictions, we can take specific practical steps to intervene and stop genocides before it occurs. The key to success is the development of political mechanisms or structures which will heed the scientific understanding and possess the political will, which means basically the ability and the physical force necessary to intervene to stop genocide. This model of prevention is naturalistic, in that it assumes that genocide is more or

less the same across time and space, and that it is predictable if we can isolate the variables which cause it. This naturalistic view of genocide shares much with other scientific models. It is very much like medical models in its commitment to idea that if we know the variables which cause disease that we can predict and prevent the occurrence of disease by controlling or responding to these variables. Even medical science, though, stresses that medicine is an “inexact” science and medicine never claims to control contingency. Those who don’t smoke or drink can die of heart attacks, while smokers and drinkers can live to advanced ages, a result of factors that are not known and may never be. Certainly, no one probably imagines that genocide can be completely eradicated. Yet at the same time, there seems to be a dominant sense in the field that contingency is more eliminable, or that genocide is more eliminable, than history demonstrates. This is partly because the belief in the “eliminability” of genocide is something separate from the reality of history, much the same as Kant’s idea of a society in which there is no war stands outside of the reality of history.

The naturalistic view of genocide is evident in some of the most central and important efforts at prevention in genocide studies. While we would need to look more deeply at preventative efforts to see the extent to which the naturalistic model predominates, it is useful to look at a few models here for purposes of illustration. Take, for instance, the recent efforts of those who adopt an “early warning” approach. The language of “early warning” is actually a military metaphor which describes a military strategy of forestalling attack by seeing it in its early stages and acting accordingly. The perfect military strategy would be

one in which those who are being attacked predict completely the movements of their enemies and move against them before they can implement them.

Let us consider as an example which embodies this naturalistic view of genocide. I want to be very clear at the outset that my goal here is not to dismiss the value of such research. Indeed, it is very useful to understand the structural conditions which seem to be related to instances of mass killing, or even assumed to be their primary causes. Thus, while I consider naturalistic approaches to be somewhat too optimistic in their belief in the preventability of genocide, I consider what they have discovered to be useful as a basis from which to build more complex theories of genocide. What is at issue here are the assumptions that underlay a naturalistic approach to genocide and genocide prevention and the ways in which naturalistic approaches dodge the issue of historical contingency and theoretical perspectives which privilege the role of human agency, on the one hand, and external cultural and social dynamics, on the other, in the analysis of why genocides occur. Here, I consider only one example since it seems to embody this approach. From the analysis of this one example, it would be useful to consider whether this is the dominant approach in genocide studies. My hypothesis would be that it is.

The article under consideration is entitled “ Systematic Early Warning of Humanitarian Emergencies” by Barbara Harff and Ted Robert Gurr (12). The authors present an insightful analysis of the structural factors which are the background conditions of genocide and politicide, in their own words: “Genocide and politicide are attributed to background conditions (e.g. political upheaval),

intervening conditions (e.g. fragmentation), and a short-term increase in theoretically prespecified accelerators (p. 551)... Genocide and mass murder... are proposed to be a response to background conditions such as political upheaval, strength of group identities and regime structures, intervening conditions such as characteristics of the governing elite; and accelerators” (p. 558). Accelerators are “variables which are subject to short-term change and are operationalized as multiple events outside parameters of the general model... they act together to rapidly increase the level and significance of the most volatile of the general conditions of genocide and politicide and thus exponentially increase the likelihood that an episode will occur.” (p. 562).

The naturalistic approach favors structural forces over human agency in the explanation of genocide. This conception mirrors the more general approach of positivism in social science which views structure rather than agency as the motive force in social outcomes. Genocide is conceived much more as an outcome of certain structural processes rather than as a type of social action. Such structural approaches dominate the social sciences and are reflected in genocide studies as well. Yet, if we conceive of genocide as a type of social action, then our focus must be on seeing it as an interaction between structure and agency, as something which is much more of a “creation” or an “accomplishment” than result of a particular constellation of social structures.

The naturalistic model is guided by two further assumptions, the assumption of predictability and the assumption of preventability. These assumptions are plainly evident in Harff and Gurr’s work. The first assumption

holds that “empirical theory and evidence on ethno-political warfare and genocide and politicide are good enough to identify sites of potential future episodes” (p. 552). The idea here is that the internal structural conditions which give rise to genocide and politicide in one historical situation are transposable to other historical situations. This may very well be the case, but not necessarily so, and this view is somewhat ahistorical. It seems to dismiss the idea of historical contingency in determining whether or not genocide will occur. Such a view could lead to the dismissal of situations in which genocide might occur even without the presence of the structural factors which the authors hold to be crucial. That is to say, the naturalistic model assumes a degree of predictability which may not be the case historically and one would want to perhaps consider instances of genocide in which the structural factors which the authors isolate do not exist, but in which genocide still occurs.

Regarding the assumption of preventability, Harff and Gurr assume that “if researchers can forecast more accurately the sites and sequences of crisis escalation, policy makers will be more likely to act early rather than late” (p. 552). One might ask: why is that the case? One could just as well argue -- and we shall focus on this point later – that early warnings of potential genocides might make policy-makers, most of whom still operate according to the principle of what is in the interests of the states which they serve, actually serve as advance warning that the state will need to distance itself from the conflict in order to avoid intervention and the imbroglios that come from such intervention. It is rather clear, for instance, from examples of genocide in the 1990s, that early warnings

of impending genocides serves as “red flags” which mobilized powerful states to distance themselves from the conflicts rather than engage them head on.

Harff and Gurr believe that their theoretical models will predict genocide and they state their case with considerable power. In all fairness, they are well aware that is at least some contingency involved and that their models cannot be mechanistically applied to every case. They note that “theoretical models, even with the best available data and statistical techniques, are not sufficient to bridge the gap between risk assessment and early warning. A comprehensive system for explaining and forewarning of humanitarian crises also requires a systematic, close to real time monitoring of potential crisis situations in risk assessments.” (p. 556). This is an important qualification, since it acknowledges the existence of other, perhaps less predictable factors, which make it more probable that genocide will occur. The authors’ logic appears to be that we need to know the structural factors which serve as the stage for potential genocides. Subsequently, we must monitor particular situations for certain “ accelerators” which serve as catalysts which spark the “reaction” of genocide (note the scientific imagery here). While I am critical of the structural determinism evident in such naturalistic models, I believe the authors’ idea of accelerators serves as an important bridge by which to introduce several new ideas about the context in which genocide occurs. The authors focus primarily on accelerators within the societies. That is, the model focuses almost exclusively on endogenous factors which are held to be the causal mechanisms of genocide. Certainly those endogenous factors are crucial and we are better off for knowing about them. Yet, I would argue that

exogenous factors are extremely important as well and these exogenous factors have much to do with the condition of modernity. Such conditions make the prediction of genocide much more problematic and introduce much more historical contingency into the task of understanding genocide. I would like to take this idea as a starting point for building a more complex theory of genocide which considers the ways in which aspects of the structure and culture of modern cultures.

The Normalcy of Genocide versus the Prevention of Genocide

Why is genocide so durable and perennial, and why does it keep occurring even in the light of so much knowledge about it and so many attempts to prevent it? There are a number of responses to this question. As I have already mentioned, some argue that the failure to prevent genocide is because those who have the power to stop it lack the will to do so. On this view, either powerful states such as the United States or ineffective (but always symbolically important) bodies such as the UN are somehow to blame for the persistence of genocide. Quite often, one hears the variant of this that the failure to stop genocide is due to a lack of “leadership”. Others argue that the failure is due to the lack of an international criminal court, which could punish *genocidaires* and thus prevent future genocides. Still others argue that genocide cannot be prevented until global inequalities and injustices are eliminated and democratic processes and redistributive programs are generalized around the globe. In all of these cases, it is held that some instrument of modernity – a modern state, a

modern bureaucratic organization, a modern legal system, a more equitable system of resource allocation -- if deployed properly, would alleviate the condition of genocide.

In all of these cases, there is usually no recognition of the possibility that genocide might be inextricably linked, and even facilitated and enabled by the very modern organizations and practices which people imagine to be the tools which will help prevent genocide. Preventative discourse is itself part of the modern project, an expression of a twentieth century belief in the Enlightenment dream of constructing the good society by preventing radical evil. But modernity is, itself, not defined purely by its progressive and utopian elements. It is characterized as well by technologies, practices, and forms of social organization which have not eradicated gross violations of human rights, but enhanced the capacity of people to commit them. From within the context of the human rights community, which is organized around the ideology that human rights abuses such as genocide are preventable and eradicable, this idea is rather radical and provocative, for the logical conclusion of arguing that it is modernity itself which creates the perpetuation of the conditions for the continuation of genocide, is that we must invariably ask ourselves about our own role in facilitating that which we despise. Based on the history of the 1990s alone and the experience of genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda, we must face a number of facts about the relationship between modernity and genocide:

1. Modern systems of government and non-state organizations are responsible for failing to act when knowledge of genocide is there for everyone to see. In spite of rhetorical commitments to peace, modern governments remain committed to *realpolitik* in international relations and the modern context has allowed for new forms of expression of *realpolitik* rather than a replacement of the latter by an ethic of “perpetual peace” or morality in foreign relations. The United Nations is an organization which is, symbolically, a manifestation of the Enlightenment idea of perpetual peace, but which has since its inception either: A. Proceeded – especially in the case of some of the grossest forms of human rights violations – according to the logic of *realpolitik* or, B. As Michael Barnett has shown dramatically in the case of Rwanda, with reference to its own organizational cultural norms and values rather than more global universal prescriptive values of human rights or proscriptive norms against genocide (13). Much prevention discourse in genocide studies relies on a faith in the United Nations as the key mechanism in preventing genocide. History would provide a strong counterfactual argument to such a view.

This problem is confounded by the durable persistence of the reality of state sovereignty. As much as there has been a movement against the right of sovereigns to do as they please within their own territories, the present world –system is still characterized by several autonomous sovereign states which have the power to more or less do as they please within their own territories. Thus, the Russian destruction of Chechnya, which is by most measures genocidal in character, cannot be checked by any outside force since Russia

enjoys sovereign status in the modern world-system. China's destruction of Tibet, surely an act of cultural genocide, cannot be countered since China enjoys the privilege of sovereignty. To think about a future case, it is instructive to consider India. Recent events in that country have led to a situation in which violence of a genocidal nature could occur against Muslims. Since it is a nuclear power, it is very unlikely that any powerful state would intervene to stop genocide there. The prevention of genocide is restricted mostly to states that do not have the power to resist intervention by stronger powers. Genocide prevention is thus restricted by the continuing reality of state sovereignty and the pervasive influence of *realpolitik* in the contemporary world-system. Moreover, especially in a state of social anxiety and uncertainty, states promote their own national cultures and shy away from universal or transnational norms. The present situation of the United States' mobilization in the war against terrorism is evidence of this trend. Concerns of national security trump any adherence to collective norms which are supposedly the cultural edifice upon which the international community is based.

2. Modern political practices of negotiation with actual and potential *genocidaires*, which are grounded in the Enlightenment belief in "perpetual peace," are ineffective against those who do not share such ideals and negotiations. Negotiation is as old as politics itself, but specifically modern forms of negotiation have developed which have been deployed to prevent genocide. Yet these are more often ideological expressions of the desire for

peace and the prevention of genocide than they are actual mechanisms of peace and prevention. In both Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda, political actors engaged in negotiations with perpetrators of genocide and it was under cover of such negotiations that a great deal of mass-killing was perpetrated. In Bosnia, the greater part of the genocide which occurred there took place under the cover of negotiations, which Milosevic and Karadzic exploited to their full advantage. The modern mentality of achieving peace through non-violent means such as negotiation stands in sharp contrast to a genocidal mentality which not only stands outside of the discourse which values negotiation, but actively and consciously exploits such negotiation to further the practice of genocide. The intersection of negotiation, a modern practice, with genocide (which is neither modern nor “pre-modern” but simply a perennial social phenomenon) favors the latter. Genocide is the practice of human agents who reflexively monitor the social world around them and adapt their social actions accordingly. Such reflexive monitoring is exceedingly difficult to control, since it is always resilient and adaptive to any efforts to control it.

3. Modern non-governmental organizations of civil society respond to crises and potential genocides in organizational forms which become bureaucratic and lethargic because of their complexity. While we usually imagine a condition of modernity to be an emphasis on speed and efficiency – and in modern culture it is – as Max Weber showed, modernity is also characterized by the diffusion and entrenchment of bureaucracy as a means toward solving social problems. In contrast, while genocide may be organized bureaucratically, it is

also more resilient and adaptable. Our understandings of genocide seem to rely on a model of genocide taken directly from the experience of the Holocaust. The Holocaust represented a “perversion” of modernity, the use of modern means to facilitate mass killing. The aim of the Nazis was to kill as many Jews as possible and they used the instruments of modernity – bureaucracy and technology – to do so. Yet it might be the case that genocides which have occurred since then do not fit that model. Certainly, there are elements of the social organization of mass killing in Bosnia. Yet a good deal of the killing took place in an anarchic and unsystematic way. This was especially evident in Rwanda which was a case of what might be called “anarchic genocide.”

Perpetrators of modern genocides develop skillful means for taking advantage of the lethargy of bureaucratic and procedural responses to genocide. That is to say, they commit genocide in the spaces and cracks which bureaucracy inevitably leaves unattended. This raises the question of whether prevention of atrocities – which by their nature are often quick and “reflexive” -- can be attained by modern bureaucratic means. It also raises the more general question of whether bureaucracy can ever be the ideal means for the positive fostering and expansion of human rights, a point which deserves more examination than I can offer here. The modern genocidal process is somewhat anarchic and it may be that more anarchic, less decentralized means of combating it must be developed. Such anarchic means of prevention cannot necessarily rely on a naturalistic model which imagines that it has isolated all of the predictors of genocide.

4. The citizens of modern countries live in a culture of capitalist modernity, which is a consumer culture. The prevention of genocide to a great extent on public support of the citizens in those countries which have the power to act against genocide. Consumer culture, however, creates narcissistic and egoistic individuals who focus primarily on self-gratification, (or the gratification of the family unit) and who are generally indifferent to the suffering of others, especially what Luc Boltanski refers to as “distant suffering” (14). The expectation that citizens in modern societies will respond to distant suffering relies on a mythical construction of “concerned citizens” who, having found out that there is genocide going, on will exhort their leaders to exert leadership in order to prevent it. In fact, the natural state of modern consciousness is indifference and only through extraordinary effort is such indifference overcome. Modernity also poses specific challenges to peoples’ abilities to evaluate the scale and intensity of phenomena in their environment. This idea was put forth by Georg Simmel who argued that modernity made it difficult for people to make distinctions among phenomena, or what he called “the blasé attitude” (15). The primary characteristic of the blasé attitude is the inability to make value distinctions, an inability which makes it difficult for people to act according to any dominant normative scenario. The blasé attitude of modern people is exacerbated by the rise of the “society of the spectacle in which a whole range of cultural phenomena are treated as extraordinary and spectacular, so that when a person is confronted with a true spectacle of atrocity (such as that of Bosnia, which was the most publicized genocide in history), they are unable to distinguish

its reality from the culturally constructed and simulated spectacles which frame their environment (16). Thus, the spectacle of genocide, instead of mobilizing cognitive support, can lead to a turning away or an assimilation of the reality of the spectacle into a universe of cultural simulations.

5. Modern technologies of mass media, designed to spread knowledge for progress, contribute to a cultural environment in which it is difficult to hold attention to serious phenomena such as genocide and creates a situation of “compassion fatigue” which leads to an active turning away, or indifference (17). In this case, the media may succeed in informing observers of genocide that genocide is occurring and awakening or creating emotional responses. But there can be no presumed relation between image and action: in fact, the relationship between image and action in Bosnia-Herzegovina appears to have been an inverse one: the more the world knew about the genocide, the more violent and diffuse the genocide became. In addition to the effects of media coverage on public sentiment and action, the modern media have become tools of propaganda, which are used as a central means for mobilizing people to commit genocide. If one examines the discourse that accompanied the invention of major mass media in the twentieth century – radio, film, television – one sees a distinct pattern of belief in the positive and progressive potential of the media. They were seen in liberal democratic societies as the means by which an enlightened popular democracy could be formed. Yet each technological innovation in mass media was also appropriated by anti-Enlightenment powers – most notably by

fascists – and put in the service of domination and, in the case of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, genocide. This use of mass media, as an instrument of domination, has continued into the present and has been a central factor in the perpetration of genocide. The use of radio to incite Hutu massacres of Tutsi in Rwanda is well known. Serbian and Croatian elites skillfully controlled and manipulated the mass media in order to create symbolic images of enemies as a precondition for their physical destruction in the form of genocide. A consideration of the mass media in modernity leads us to the conclusion that knowledge remains a form of power, but that is a form of power which might aid and abet the “modern” practice of genocide.

6. Modern scholars, intellectuals, and experts (the latter category being an invention of modernity), who produce knowledge about human events have not necessarily produced accounts which have helped to prevent genocide. Rather, they often produce accounts obfuscate, confuse, and distract political leaders and citizenry by calling into question the reality of genocide, the status of victims of genocide, and the possibility of preventing genocide. This is especially the case with knowledge producers who serve as advisors to powerful states. The modern world is characterized by the development of a distinct class of “experts” whose knowledge is drawn on by political elites. In many cases, this expert knowledge does not serve the interest of victims of genocide, but, rather, serves to solidify states’ positions of self-interest and legitimate what might be called “distance from genocide.” As the cases of both Bosnia and Rwanda show

in the 1990s, political elites in the West surrounded themselves with experts who skillfully reconceptualized the reality of mass killing in far away places. At least a major part of prevention of genocide, as Lemkin showed, is the necessity of naming it as such. Yet what we have seen in the modern era is the emergence of a whole new class of experts whose task it is to engage in the definition of the situation, to produce the cognitive categories which serves the interests of states or non-state organizations which, for whatever reason, do now wish to take action to prevent genocide. As Joseph Bensman has argued, experts and systems of expertise are a central aspect of modernity and they figure fundamentally in the production of knowledge, concepts, and world images which have a decisive influence on the conduct of genocide (18). What is more important, new classes of experts, each with their own vested interests, create opposing myths of what is “really” happening in the world. The more accounts that are created and the stronger they are expressed, the more we see a “collapse of socially objective reality” (19). That is to say, it becomes more and more difficult for consumers of expertness, especially if experts disagree on whether or not genocide is being committed, to commit to a common definition of the situation. The result is social apathy (20).

If we take the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina as an example, what emerged in the course of the war were (at least”) two classes of experts: those who made the case that what was occurring there was not a genocide, but a “civil war” and those who argued that what was occurring there was genocide (21). Because the experts held so strongly to their respective points, and because the

experts in each case were of high social and professional standing and credibility, it was hard for outside observers who were at a distance from events to make any concrete decision about the definition of the situation on the ground. Predictably, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, those experts that were preferred by the U.S. government at the time when the mass killing start (which I consider to be the invasion of Croatia by the J.N.A) were those who argued that the killing in Croatia and then Bosnia was not genocide, but “civil war.” This alliance between experts who provide the symbolic definition that is useful to governments which do not wish to get involved in the prevention of genocide should be an object of more serious study by those who want to understand the relationship between modernity and genocide, for under conditions of modernity, experts have become the cultural arm of the political orders which hold the power to prevent genocide. More generally, the clash of experts is a fundamental aspect of complex, modern societies, and the confusion and chaos in interpretation caused by competing experts’ definition of reality makes it easier for perpetrators to put their genocidal plans into practice.

In each of the above points, I am challenging the conventional wisdom about the supposed progressive nature of modern organizations, cultural practices, and individuals. Each of these points sees exogenous factors as crucial factors in facilitating genocide. Together with the work of those who focus on endogenous factors, I believe that we can develop a more realistic view of the possibilities of genocide prevention. Such a task, however, demands nothing short of a rethinking of the idea of genocide prevention in light of the idea that

there are several aspects of modernity which actually contribute to the persistence of genocide. Instead of seeing genocide as some kind of aberration in modernity, we need to reconceptualize it as a somewhat more normal part of modernity.

The idea that genocide is a product of modernity is one which has been made by several sociologists, especially Zygmunt Bauman, who argues that the Holocaust was made possible by the lethal combination of advanced technologies, modern bureaucratic social organizations, and the utopian ideas which are at the basis of the modern project (22). While Bauman articulates a fundamental linkage between modernity and the Holocaust, scholars have been more hesitant to make such an explicit linkage between genocide more generally and modernity. As I have argued, this is because the modern project is defined primarily in positive terms: the negative consequences of modernity are hard to conceptualize precisely because it is modernity which is the source of utopian dreams and the taken-for-granted prevention discourse that guides most practitioners whose aim it is to prevent genocide. From a modernist point of view, genocide is the worst thing that can happen in a human society, the nadir of social progress, the very embodiment of the barbarism that modernity is trying to leave behind. The modernist idealist, the preventer and practitioner of human rights, simply cannot abide the fact that not only is genocide not been prevented or eradicated, but has actually been on the rise just when, after the fall of barbaric communism, we were supposed to have achieved the Hegelian end of history and the triumphant success of capitalist modernity and a universalization

of human rights. For the true believer, genocide is the anomaly of anomalies, that which should not be there, but which should definitely not be ascendant. The overriding assumption then, is that through study and diligent application, genocide should cease to trouble the conscience of humankind. This belief grates against the idea that genocide might be a “normal” consequence of modernity. Genocide is not a phenomenon that is counter to modernity, but actually built-in to modernity, and, indeed, facilitated by the very social processes of modernity.

Some Tentative Conclusions

I have addressed numerous themes in this essay: the origin of the field of genocide studies as a preventative project of modernity and as a form of human rights practice, the relationship between genocide and modernity, and a specific and rather pronounced critique of the conceptual practices of genocide studies. My specific aim has been to rethink the entire idea of “preventability” of genocide and to show how the prevention of genocide depends on the critical self-examination of the organization of knowledge about genocide as well as knowledge about the modern social forces which enable and abet the practice of genocide in the immediate past and present. This is a crucial starting point, since there is virtually no work on either the nature of prevention discourse in genocide studies, and very little more work on the relationship between modernity and genocide.

Those who wish to prevent genocide need to ask themselves a number of tough questions: Can we eradicate the worst things that we do to each other? What are the limits of our understanding of the things we wish to fight against? How do we operate in a field which might be more complex than we might now? How does what we do, either theoretically or practically, affect the world in ways, which might counter our efforts and beliefs?

There are no easy answers to these questions. They are, in their very nature, posed as enticements for further thinking rather than in the spirit of providing easy answers. Since I made the claim in the opening part of this essay that I shared the spirit of those in genocide studies who wish to prevent genocide, I would like to offer at least some preliminary discussion of how the understanding of genocide here can facilitate prevention. To be sure, by locating some of the forces that lead to genocide in the very fabric of modernity itself, we make the problem much more difficult, since to try to counter modernity itself seems somewhat quixotic – modernity is quite a large windmill to tilt against. Nonetheless, by uncovering the relationship between modernity and genocide, we open the way to more sophisticated approaches to the enduring problem of genocide. Practical efforts to prevent genocide must proceed with an understanding of genocide which takes into consideration the ways in which genocide is facilitated by a modern society which has spawned the very impulse to prevent this most serious of crimes.

ENDNOTES:

- 1) Versions of this paper were presented in numerous venues, including the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University, the American Sociological Association, the University of Connecticut, the Danish Center for Genocide and Holocaust Studies, the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo, and the Department of Philosophy at the University of Oslo. I am grateful to these institutions for extending invitations to me to share and refine the ideas presented here and am grateful for the many criticisms, questions, and comments from audiences in these places. I am also grateful to Michael N. Barnett, Rhoda Howard-Hassmann, Bridget Conley, John Torpey, Arne Johan Vetlesen, Sally Merry, Michael Kaus, Israel Charney, Jerry Fowler, and Eric Markusen, for providing thoughtful and constructive comments on various versions of the paper. Such comments in no way signify agreement with all of the ideas presented here, but have helped me sharpen my thoughts on these difficult matters.
- 2) This is not to say, however, that it is not valuable to understand genocide in a comparative-historical perspective, as say, in the work of Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analysis and Cases* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). It is to say, though, that the way that genocide proceeds might be significantly altered by the social – structural configurations of the epoch in which it exists.
- 3) Kant's work on perpetual peace, *Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals* (Indianapolis : Hackett Pub. Co., [1983]) never assumed that humans are innately good – in fact, he specifically

posited that they were depraved and that any plans for social betterment needed to take this depravity into account.

- 4) Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper, 1960).
- 5) Lemkin's definition of genocide appeared in the work *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation - Analysis of Government - Proposals for Redress*, (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), pp. 79 - 95. And is as follows: New conceptions require new terms. By "genocide" we mean the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group. This new word, coined by the author to denote an old practice in its modern development, is made from the ancient Greek word *genos* (race, tribe) and the Latin *cide* (killing), thus corresponding in its formation to such words as *tyrannicide*, *homicide*, *infanticide*, etc. (1) Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups. Genocide is directed

- against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group.
- 6) Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).
 - 7) Leo Kuper, *The Prevention of Genocide* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).
 - 8) Christian P. Scherrer, "Towards a theory of modern genocide. Comparative genocide research: definitions, criteria, typologies, cases, key elements, patterns and voids." *Journal of Genocide Research*, 1:1 (March 1999), p. 22.
 - 9) Mark A. Drumbi, "Sobriety in a post-genocidal society; good neighborliness among victims and aggressors in Rwanda," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 1:1 (March 1999), p. 39.
 - 10) Helen Fein, "Genocide and gender: the uses of women and group destiny," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 1:1 (March 1999), p. 59.
 - 11) The idea of domain assumption was coined by Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Harper, 1970) to describe the ideological and ontological assumption which grounded and influenced the supposedly objective and scientific practice of sociology. Gouldner's concept is ripe for application to the field for the field of genocide studies, which seldom examines its own ideological assumptions.

- 12) *Journal of Peace Research* , 35:5 (September 1998), 551-579. Michael Barnett, "The UN Security Council, Indifference, and Genocide in Rwanda," *Cultural Anthropology*, 12: 4 (December 1977).
- 13) See, also, Michael Barnett, *Eyewitness to Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001).
- 14) Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 15) Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life", in Donald N. Levine, *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 324-329.
- 16) On the "society of the spectacle", see Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red), 199.
- 17) Susan D. Moeller, "Compassion Fatigue (New York: Routledge, 1998).
- 18) Joseph Bensman, *Craft and Consciousness: Occupational Technique and the Development of World Images* (New York; Aldine de Gruyter, 1991).
- 19) Israel Gerver and Joseph Bensman, "Towards a Sociology of Expertness," in Robert Jackall, ed., *Propaganda* (New York: New York University Press, 1995). P. 68-69.
- 20) *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 21) I should be clear here that I define myself, and was seen by others as an expert representing the second view. I argued very early on that what had occurred in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina was, according to legal criteria and sociological conceptualizations, genocide. At the time, among

most professionals in the Western Balkan studies community, this view was more or less scoffed at. See, for example, Robert Hayden, "The Tactical Uses of Passion," *Current Anthropology*, 38:5, [December, 1997], pp. 924-936, and my rejoinder, Thomas Cushman, "On Bosnia: A Response to Hayden", *Current Anthropology*, 40:3 (June, 1999), p., 365-366. This interchange represents this clash of expertness which I am discussing here. It is interesting to note that a number of major scholars refused to use and even eschewed the use of the term "genocide" to describe events in BiH: in most cases, that class of experts was much closer to government power (i.e., the Brookings Institution, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars) than more . This point needs much more attention than can be given here.

22) Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

Commentary on 'Is Genocide Preventable? Some Theoretical Considerations,' by Thomas Cushman

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In this stimulating, iconoclastic essay, Professor Cushman applies a sociology of knowledge perspective to the emerging interdisciplinary field of genocide studies. This perspective regards “knowledge of genocide as a cultural product of various scholars with particular world-views, biographies, ideological dispositions, and material interests which shape and influence the structure of what we know about genocide.” One such “ideological disposition” that Cushman discerns in the writing of genocide scholars is the fundamental conviction that genocide is preventable.

While Cushman does not assert that genocide is intrinsically unpreventable, he does question the tendency of genocide scholars to assume that knowledge of genocide will somehow lead to successful efforts to prevent future cases. Indeed, he calls this an “orthodox belief in genocide studies” and warns that what he says in his essay is, “from the outset, a form of heresy.”

One factor identified by Cushman that helps account for this “Enlightenment” faith in the power of knowledge to improve the world, is the over-reliance by genocide scholars on theories and models that are “positivistic, naturalistic, and deterministic.” Such models, he argues, fail to adequately appreciate some of “the most important aspects of genocide as it appears in

modern social conditions: its contingency, unpredictability, and its status as a product of human agency.”

As an example of such a “positivistic model,” Cushman cites an article by Barbara Harff and Ted Robert Gurr in which they identify background conditions and other indicators that genocidal violence may erupt in a particular society. Such “early warning signs” can, potentially, alert governmental and non-governmental actors to take action in time to prevent or stop mass killing. Cushman does not disagree that this approach may have some value, but he finds it woefully incomplete, with its focus “almost exclusively on endogenous factors” and its corresponding neglect of such “exogenous factors” as national interest, geopolitics, and “the condition of modernity.”

Failure by genocide scholars to properly confront the “condition of modernity” is another important and valuable theme of this essay. Cushman identifies a number of “aspects of modernity” which not only mitigate against prevention of genocide, but actually facilitate its perpetration. These aspects include: the tendency of modern governments to be swayed more by “realpolitik” than by Enlightenment values like human rights; faith in the “modern” practice of negotiation with actual and potential genocidaires; the “diffusion and entrenchment of bureaucracy as a means toward solving social problems;” the culture of indifference in modern, capitalist, consumer societies; modern mass media as agents of propaganda; and, finally, the availability of experts who often “obfuscate, confuse, and distract political leaders and citizenry by calling into question the reality of genocide.”

The failure of genocide scholars to deal with such issues, Cushman suggests, may be why what he describes as “the genocide prevention industry” has been so woefully unsuccessful in preventing or stopping genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda during the 1990s. I return to “genocide prevention industry” below.

All of the above are important and valid points, and Cushman’s effort to “study the study of genocide,” to use his terms, is a welcome contribution by a scholar who does not claim to be an “expert” on genocide, but who brings powerful analytic and theoretical skills to critique the discourse of genocide scholars.

However, if Cushman's essay illustrates the benefit of someone from the outside looking into a specialized field of study in order to expose ideological and methodological limitations, it also demonstrates the challenges faced by scholars who attempt to critique a discipline on the basis of incomplete knowledge, which can lead to errors of fact and interpretation. While the margins of my copy of the text are filled with such comments as “good point” and “N.B.,” they are also filled with question marks and critical comments.

For example, early in his essay, Cushman asserts that “most theories of genocide are ahistorical” and argues instead that such theories “must always be looked at in relation to the specific historical epochs in which they occur.” However, the most important works in the field are in fact well-grounded historically, for example, Robert Melson’s work on the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, Vahakn Dadria’s publications on the Armenian genocide, Ben Kiernan’s studies of the Khmer Rouge, Colin Tatz’s work on the genocide of the

Australian Aborigines, and many studies of the Holocaust. The relatively few genocide scholars who have attempted to develop actual theories of genocide have relied on such sources.

Moreover, Cushman perhaps overestimates the number of genocide scholars and the impact of genocide studies when he writes “Indeed, the 1990s, a period of rapid growth of the ‘genocide prevention industry,’ was the period in which two major genocides occurred in Bosnia and Rwanda.” While the field originated during the 1940s with the scholarly work of Raphael Lemkin (most of which remains unpublished), scholars focused on genocide per se were few and scattered for several decades after World War II. It was not until 1995--after the Rwandan genocide and well into the Bosnian genocide--that a professional organization, the Association of Genocide Scholars, was established. And a journal focused exclusively on genocide, *Journal of Genocide Research*, was founded only in 1999. However, the willingness in 1999 of a coalition of nations to use NATO power to interrupt the Serbian expulsion of ethnic Albanians stands in contrast to the debacles of mid-decade.

I have questions about Cushman’s depiction of the work of Leo Kuper, a pioneer in the field of genocide studies, on the issue of genocide prevention. Cushman appears to see in Kuper an example of the ideology of “preventionism.” Cushman points out that in his landmark 1981 work, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century*, Kuper does, in the last chapter, address the issue of prevention. This is in the context of a discussion of societies that experienced ethnic or other group violence but did not degenerate into genocide. However, in

my reading, there is no “orthodox faith” that knowledge of genocide alone would somehow naturally lead to prevention. Indeed, Kuper’s pessimism about genocide prevention was expressed more directly in his 1985 book, *The Prevention of Genocide*. Writing of this book, Cushman states that “Kuper’s faith in the prevention of genocide by the U.N. seems prosaic at best.” (I am not sure exactly what Cushman means by “prosaic.” Meanings given in my dictionary are: commonplace or dull; matter of fact or unimaginative.) In any case, the whole point of Kuper’s book was not to express faith in the United Nations and optimism about genocide prevention, but to expose and criticize its failure to effectively prevent genocides that occurred after the Holocaust and the creation of the UN Genocide Convention. It should be noted here that Cushman does not even mention two recent books on genocide prevention, *Protection Against Genocide: Mission Impossible?*, edited by Neal Riemer in 2000, and *How to Prevent Genocide*, by John Heidenrich in 2001. One would hope that he subjects them, and a forthcoming book by Herbert Hirsch, to his critical analysis.

Notwithstanding such caveats, which are small in proportion to its value, Cushman’s essay is an important and timely contribution to the field of genocide studies. Indeed, we are fortunate that he has decided to expand this paper into a larger sociology of genocide studies and has organized a panel on “definitionalism” in genocide studies for the Galway conference of genocide scholars.

In conclusion, I hope that all genocide scholars have the opportunity to read this essay and to engage in dialogue and debate with Tom Cushman on

these matters. Knowing him as a friend as well as colleague, I know he relishes such exchanges.

The Distinct, Complex and Ongoing Evolution of Genocide Studies:

Commentary on “Is Genocide Preventable? Some Theoretical Considerations” by Thomas Cushman

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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 genocide (2) 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

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 Genocide (8), 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 elimination (10). 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 politicization 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.

ENDNOTES:

- 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.

Commentary on “Is Genocide Preventable? Some Theoretical Considerations” by Thomas Cushman

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I wish to thank the Jerry Fowler and Committee on Conscience at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for inviting me to speak at this important discussion. Let me say at the outset that I am not a genocide expert or scholar and my knowledge and interest in genocide studies is framed through the lens of conflict prevention.

A decade ago we had high hopes for a different kind of world. Many of us thought that the end of the Cold War would bring with it a more peaceful international order. Instead, the 1990s were characterized by the troubling persistence of deadly conflict. In places like Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Rwanda, turmoil was unleashed and violence took hold on a shocking scale. Tragically, the victims of these conflicts were increasingly civilians, particularly women and children. New trends in conflict moved away from traditional warfare to terrorism, civil war, and genocide, raising new questions about the role that the United States and the international community should play in resolving these conflicts, and the problems of refugees, drug and gun trafficking, and weapons proliferation.

September 11 brought this violence to the United States. The threat that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to terrorists will lead to violence

on an unimaginable scale is the worst-case scenario that plagues citizens and policymakers alike.

It is easy to believe that the cycle of violence will go on indefinitely, that peace cannot be realized, and that military power is the only thing that counts in international relations. Questions abound about how the United States should conduct itself as a superpower and whether there is hope for the community of nations to peacefully coexist.

The idea of conflict prevention is a simple one. Preventive medicine saves countless lives, dollars, and immeasurable human suffering by stopping disease before it can take place. Why not apply the same logic to the prevention of deadly conflict? Instead of dealing with violence after it breaks out, take measures to prevent deadly conflicts from occurring. Instead of treating symptoms, remove the cause of the disease before it can take hold.

Given our location, it hardly bears repeating that the western democracies failed to take action against Hitler when decisiveness and coordination could have stopped the German dictator's expansionist killing machine before it became an unremitting plague. World War II was a *preventable* conflict, but the western powers lacked the tools, methods, and political will to act until it was too late. Indeed today's debate on whether to go to war against Iraq focuses on that argument – that by backing down the United States and George Bush will acquiescence in the same manner as Great Britain and Neville Chamberlain did in the days leading to the second World War.

I suppose it is human nature to control our environment and although Cushman discusses Kantian idealism, he does note that violence and wickedness have always been with us. I'd say it's likely that they always will. However, war is not the weather – it's not like the DC snowstorm that we know is coming, try to prepare for it, but are ultimately at its mercy. Things are different unlike Europe in the 1930s, we have more effective tools for prevention at our disposal. We have international institutions like the UN and IMF, institutionalized alliances like NATO and the U.S.-Japan security arrangement, international legal norms, economic incentives and deterrents, extensive intelligence capabilities to anticipate conflicts, and technology that allows for more effective diplomacy and action. In short, we have both the motivation and the means for prevention in a way that was distinctly lacking in the 1930s.

The simplicity of the idea of prevention is countered by the immensity of the challenge. Complex issues of national interest, international law, cost, method and timing inevitably arise. Kofi Annan has remarked, "For the United Nations, there is no higher goal, no deeper commitment and no greater ambition than preventing armed conflict." Few would dispute this ideal, but the implementation of prevention is another matter.

Many people roll their eyes when they hear about conflict prevention and recent books by Samantha Powers and Alan Kuperman highlight the difficulties of acting early and forcefully to prevent genocide. Thomas Cushman is correct, and I will come back to this point later, that an assumption of conflict prevention is underpinned by social progress. And as he rightly points out in his paper, and

perhaps it is precisely because I AM NOT a genocide scholar, that I don't see his essay as heresy. Modernity and globalization do serve to offer many people a better way of life. However at the same time, not everyone is benefiting from globalization and in some cases states in transition are increasingly unable to undertake the basic functions of governance. Weak states are unable to deliver basic services to a majority of their people; unable to either integrate their economies with those of their neighbors or defend their nations against external threats; and unable to provide the basic internal security required to prevent a host of transnational threats from taking root. The global impact of at-risk and weak states is devastating—populations suffer the deterioration of living standards, the spread of corruption, the abrogation of political and social freedoms, and violence, all the while missing out on any of the benefits to be gained from joining the global economy. For the international system, the effects are potentially dangerous, as evidenced by Afghanistan, which became a breeding ground for illicit networks, regional instability, mass migration, murder, and the export of terror. Even when vulnerable states pose little immediate threat to the United States, their downward spiral and chronic crises will eventually demand a response.

After all, policymakers are overwhelmed by crises that are already in action. I retell a story of my boss, Lee Hamilton, a number of years ago, he was in the office of the National Security Advisor Tony Lake. He asked about the large stack of files on his desk. He said, those files all deserve immediate

attention, they cannot wait. Then he noticed another large stack, twice as high, behind him. Those, Lake said, are the ones that are extremely urgent.

Things have only gotten more difficult. The U.S. is now engaged in a global war against terrorists who are in over eighty countries around the globe. The prospect of a war in Iraq dominates the international and domestic debate. How can policymakers find the time to address conflicts that haven't yet taken place, or to address troubling situations in a distant corner of Indonesia, Zimbabwe, or Colombia? Many people would agree that it is a worthwhile goal to prevent these conflicts or to stop them from spreading. The problem is one of political will: why should policymakers take time off from today's more evident crises to focus on tomorrow's problems?

The simple answer is that it is in our national interest to act preventively. As we have seen, today's brush fire can be tomorrow's forest fire. The United States, as the world's richest and most powerful nation, is the country that is looked at as both a target for angry and disaffected peoples, and as the indispensable nation that must help resolve large-scale conflicts after they take root. In a globalized world, we are inevitably drawn into conflicts – either financially or militarily – and our burdens are vast and growing. Unless a better system of conflict prevention is developed, the burden on the United States to respond to instability and conflict will be progressively greater, both financially and militarily, as could the cost in American lives.

Consider what the cost of disengagement is. The failure to remain engaged in what was clearly a failing state in Afghanistan after Soviet withdrawal

led to the Taliban and a fertile ground for terrorists. The failure to act in Rwanda – where there was already a U.N. peacekeeping force – permitted a genocide that led to a long and protracted multi-state war that cost millions of lives. Apart from the human catastrophe that cannot be measured, the U.S. spent \$750 million from 1994 to 1996 on aid related to the fallout from the genocide – an amount that is roughly equal to the entire annual U.S. aid budget to Africa, and far more than preventive measures would have cost. The cold truth is that seemingly distant conflicts of today can inevitably cost the U.S. lives and treasure in the future.

The fact that we see fewer instances of interstate war is perhaps even more remarkable when we consider the number and size of states around the world in the throes of profound political, social, and economic transition. For many of these states the process is painful and protracted. Leaders have been deposed, and governments have been reconstructed from the ground up, creating a volatile political climate without the benefit of established structures that have popular confidence and the flexibility to absorb the profound changes. Economies are in disarray, and social cohesion is severely strained. We might expect to see more traditional conflict between these states, especially where concentrations of one country's nationalities are found in another. Yet we do not. The majority of these states in transition remain free of open conflict. Indeed, of the internal conflicts begun or continued in the post-Cold War period, those that involve states in transition--for example, Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Serbia, and Tajikistan--are outnumbered by

those that involve established states, many with long histories of internal discord: Afghanistan, Algeria, Burundi, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Yemen, and others.

Certainly all of these "internal" conflicts have the clear potential for spillover. In fact, many outsiders have become involved in these conflicts either through participation with organized forces on the ground or by supplying weapons and support for one side. Yet it is also worth noting that there has been far less spillover than we might have expected, for example, in Bosnia.

WHY

The words "ethnic," "religious," "tribal," or "factional" do not adequately explain why people use violence to achieve their goals, especially since a wide range of mechanisms exists in every region of the globe to address political and cultural grievances and offer alternatives to violence. Indeed, to label a conflict simply as an "ethnic war" can lead to misguided policy choices: It helps build a wrong impression that ethnic, cultural, or religious differences inevitably result in conflict and that the only way to avoid conflict is to suppress differences. We have seen time and time again in this century, however, that suppression itself too often leads to bloodshed.

Why, then, does mass violence break out? A number of factors help create conditions prone to warfare: political and economic legacies of colonialism or the Cold War, illegitimate governmental institutions, problematic regional relationships, social cleavages derived from poorly managed religious, cultural,

or ethnic differences, widespread illiteracy, disease and disability, lack of resources such as water and arable land, and patterns of political repression, cultural discrimination, and systematic economic deprivation. New global political and economic forces exacerbate these factors. While some conflicts are new, many others are, in fact, chronic states of violence traceable to long-standing antagonisms.

When exploited by political demagogues, criminal elements, or self-aggrandizing leaders, such conditions are "ripe" for violence. Indeed, it is possible to identify a number of factors that increase the risk of violent conflict. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), for example, uses only three to project dangerous refugee situations: (a) minority populations in (b) economically depressed areas along (c) borders with kin states. But problems giving rise to deadly conflict are more complex. Other factors that heighten the likelihood of violence include despotic leaders, weak, corrupt, or collapsed regimes, sudden economic and political shifts, acute repression of major ethnic groups or other portions of society, politically active religious elements that promote hostile and divisive messages, and large stores of weapons and ammunition.

Identifying these factors as risks for violent conflict may help us understand how to prevent the outbreak of mass violence. The health effects of cigarette smoking provide an interesting (albeit imperfect) analogy. Thirty years ago we did not know what exactly it was about cigarette smoking that caused cancer and other heart and lung ailments, but we knew that smoking was a risk

factor for these diseases. In response, behavior patterns changed toward prevention. Similarly, we do not need to know precisely what it is about the interplay among the various risk factors to know that their conjunction holds a high probability for violence or that the greater the number of factors, the greater the likelihood of violence.

In sum, while we are not yet at a point where interstate war or war between the great powers is unthinkable, today; by far the most prevalent and least addressed challenges are posed by internal conflict. There is not likely to be an "unknown Rwanda" lurking on the international scene. These conflicts are known and knowable. It is implausible for modern governments to claim that they simply did not know that violence on a scale of Bosnia, Rwanda, or Somalia could happen. Similarly, people intuitively reject any argument, especially one put forward by such huge, wealthy, and powerful governments, that "nothing could be done" to prevent mass violence. These twin judgments--that many governments know (or should know) about incipient catastrophes and that something should (and can) be done before it is too late--lead us to examine the capacity and willingness of the international community to respond to the problem of deadly conflict.

Yet in spite of the poor record of prevention in the post-Cold War era in Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia, and elsewhere, publics can be moved by vivid images of unconscionable slaughter to demand that their governments "do something" to halt the killing. But even as opinion mobilizes for action, there are few clear courses of action around which to mobilize. Policymakers frequently improvise

their strategies and could clearly benefit from a more developed sense of the options: What tools and strategies work best to arrest a degenerating crisis?

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

It would be a mistake to consider preventive diplomacy or other preventive action as strategies simply to preserve the status quo when crisis threatens. Preventive action, in part, anticipates and addresses the need for necessary or desirable changes in unstable situations; it does not simply repress change. The effectiveness of preventive actions appears to rest on three essential elements: early reaction to signs of trouble, an extended effort to resolve underlying causes of violence ("root causes"), and a comprehensive, balanced approach to alleviating pressures ("risk factors") that can trigger violent conflict.

Moreover, when thinking about preventive action, the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, where I worked, distinguished between "structural" and "operational" tasks. Structural tasks address the underlying root causes of conflict and imply a long-term approach using multiple strategies to help create and maintain an environment that protects fundamental human rights and provides the circumstances in which citizens can secure a livelihood with opportunities for development and growth. Operational tasks address the risk factors and include immediate steps that could help prevent an incipient crisis from turning massively violent.

There has been a continuing disagreement about the role of the US military in preventing conflict, and some have advocated complex doctrines about

when the US should get involved. Instead, a simpler litmus test of American roles and interests would be more productive: to promote well being for all people.

Religious persuasion, ethnicity, or other traits are not the determining factor in violent conflict. It may explain why groups have disagreements, but it does not explain the slide to violence. Instead, two variables are more valid indicators: governance--the relationship of leaders to the people they lead direction of leadership (This means that you can foresee the slide toward autocracy, for example, when leaders cancel elections, militaries take over domestic portfolios, capital flight (all early warning indicators.)

It is the motivation and persuasiveness of leaders that turn what would otherwise be riots into full-fledged violent conflicts; this makes conflict a problem of governance, not other traits such as ethnicity or religion, as has been argued by Samuel Huntington and Robert Kaplan.

Two variables make a certain group of people susceptible to conflict: deprivation and discrimination. These two characteristics, however, are merely inchoate feelings of frustration unless they are manipulated by leaders able to motivate the disaffected. Yet the leaders themselves can be manipulated as well. Because of increasing interdependence among states, all wars, including intrastate conflicts, have an international element. Pressure can therefore be brought to bear on leaders of conflicting groups. This ability and desire to apply pressure in crisis situations takes on more importance because civilians are adversely affected by conflict; more civilians are killed in conflict than combatants. For example in World War I, the ratio of combatants to civilians

killed was nine to one, since the end of the Cold War, the ratio has been reversed.

Many developing countries are faced with the mounting burden of losing their ability to dominate their respective polities. Specifically, control of lethality (or armed force), capital, and rule-making processes are being transferred to private sector groups or organizations. This has brought government to the local level, but is also shunting the larger state government aside.

The role of the U.S. in these military interventions is, of course, vital and controversial. Often the U.S. is forced to do the lion's share in military operations because of its capabilities and the fact that no other nation or entity can project military power abroad fast enough to resolve a conflict. The international community must develop a means of responding militarily to deteriorating situations with a multinational rapid-response capability – most likely through the U.N. or NATO. The U.S. cannot and should not intervene everywhere. A multinational rapid-response force would take the burden off of the U.S. military, and enhance the international community's ability to take military action to prevent conflict.

International coordination and cooperation is essential to making all of these methods of prevention – diplomatic, economic, and military – work. Diplomacy is most effective when potential combatants are presented with a clear message by their neighboring states or the international community. Economic prevention only works if nations act in concert with one another – either in enforcing sanctions, delivering aid, or abiding by agreements. And

military action is far more effective and far less provocative when it is conducted with international support.

To prevent deadly conflict it is not enough to act on developing crises; we must also address the root causes of conflict around the world. We know that conflict is caused by systemic repression, alienation of groups, ethnic and religious fanaticism, and sustained poverty and lack of opportunity. We also know that good democratic governance and economic progress are the long-term solutions to these problems – the vaccines for deadly conflict. But like the very notion of prevention, fixing these problems is immensely more difficult than identifying them.

Ultimately, decisions to act become a question of political will, as Rwanda indicated. For politicians that's tied to public support. Jentleson, who has closely studied public opinion, says it's a myth that the US public has a casualty phobia and taking preventive action is more politically feasible than many assume. The public, for instance, was out in front of the president on use of ground troops in Kosovo.

Still, a natural caution and limited resources stand in the way. Political will or unwillingness, taking a wait and see approach, seeing if the violence subsides, works its way through or someone else deals with it. Rather than being the world's policeman, the United States may be faulted for its inaction, partly because short- rather than long-term thinking takes precedence in Washington. Going back to the inbox issues. Many still question how realistic a prevention strategy can be. Others point to the soaring costs, limited options, and quagmire potential of

intervening after the fact. Perhaps in the new millennium, in a shrinking world of multiplying flashpoints, prevention has simply become necessity.

The human element of deadly conflict is the hardest to predict. Sadly, we must always expect that a Hitler, a Stalin, a Pol Pot, or some other charismatic leader will emerge to harness peoples' fear, desperation or rage towards horrific ends. Many of the regimes that trouble us today are led by despots who use the power of the state to enrich themselves, their aggression, or their pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, while repressing large groups of people. Osama bin Laden joined his considerable wealth and connections with the disaffection of many people in the Muslim world in pursuit of human catastrophe and destruction. All around us is the evidence of peoples' ability to do harm to one another.

Does this mean that conflict prevention is irrelevant, that the cycle of violence is fated to proceed indefinitely into the future? To answer yes is to wager on the worst impulses of mankind. I'd like to be able to emulate David Hamburg in his recent book, *No More Killing Fields: Preventing Deadly Conflict*. At no point in Dr. Hamburg's book does he give in to this defeatism. Instead, his view is one of unbridled optimism and ferocious dedication to the idea that hard work and good thinking can achieve remarkable ends. He writes of conflict prevention, "This is difficult and prolonged work, but surely not beyond human capacity." Hamburg recalls the strategy of the Marshall Plan, when out of the absolute destruction of World War II we acted to prevent the conditions that would lead to another world war. The immensity of the challenge was huge then

as it is now, but human capacity put to work built a better world out of the rubble of Europe and East Asia. Why should we not seek a better world today?