Zimmerer, Jürgen. "The Value of Genocide Studies." *The Public Value of the Humanities*. Ed. Jonathan Bate. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. 208–218. The WISH List. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849662451.ch-016>>.

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16. The Value of Genocide Studies

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Rwanda

The day after the president died, houses started burning in our commune. Refugees began streaming in from other areas. We panicked as we saw *interhamwe* [literally translated: 'those who fight together'; these were basically Hutu death squads] following people everywhere. The second day we left home and went to look for protection in the church of Ntamara. But we were not to find any protection in the church.

About five days after we had been there, there was an attack against the church ... They threw a few grenades ... But most people who died were killed by machetes ... The attackers were *interhamwe* but they were not from our sector. They were ordinary villagers from somewhere else. They surrounded the church to knock down anyone who escaped ... People could not leave. But it was also intolerable to remain in one's position as the macheting continued. So like mad, people ran up and down inside the church. All around you, people were being killed and wounded ... The macheting continued all round me.

This was far from being an isolated case, as confirmed by an eyewitness:

I tried to get up but it was in vain. I was very weak from my injuries and there were so many bodies everywhere that I could hardly move. A few children, perhaps because they were unaware of the dangers, stood up. I called one of the children to help me. She was a girl of about nine. She replied that she could not help me because they had cut off her arms ... Finally I saw a young woman I knew, a neighbour. I called out to her. At first she did not answer. I insisted finally she responded. When I looked closely I saw she too had her arms cut off.

Both of these eyewitness reports describe the indescribable. In the early summer of 1994, Hutu militias in the central African country of Rwanda killed more than 800,000 of their compatriots, at an average of 9,000 people per day – an intensity that even exceeded the Holocaust. They indiscriminately murdered almost all Tutsi they could get their hands on and up to 200,000 moderate Hutu.

Anyone who would like to understand how this could happen, what consequences it had and whether it could be repeated, needs humanities, in

the same way as anyone who would like to help the victims or prevent similar occurrences. Humanities are central for understanding the worst crimes in human history, as they alone allow a comprehensive insight into the complex processes that lead to people having their hands cut off in a central African church (but it could happen anywhere), and babies and children being hacked to death at road blocks. However, we need humanities not only to understand the past and the present, but above all for the future. Climate change, which many regard as the central problem of modernity, confronts humankind with challenges that can no longer be solved by one single discipline. Three hundred years after the division of universal science into 'humanities' and 'sciences', and the subsequent triumphal procession of the latter, a second fusion of the two disciplines is inevitable. Genocide Studies is one of the areas in which different disciplines are already co-operating to the benefit of all. Here, the humanities are not just a cultural add-on for the actual sciences, but are actually making a leading contribution.

The historical disciplines in particular play a crucial role in this area, and this will be illustrated below, taking the genocide in Rwanda, the memorialization of the Holocaust, the Australian apology for the 'Stolen Generations' and, above all, the consequences of climate change as examples. So how did the events come about that the two introductory quotations described so grimly? The killing began in Rwanda after the aircraft of the Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana – which also had the Burundi Head of State Cyprien Ntaryamira on board – was shot down with rockets as it prepared to land in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. Radical forces (Hutu Power) in the military and the government used this opportunity to launch their long-planned genocide. Armed Hutu militias possessed lists produced in advance with the names of the Tutsi and any Hutu who were in opposition to the Hutu Power party. They systematically 'worked their way through' these lists, i.e. they killed everyone whose name appeared. They also set up road blocks where passers-by were checked. If their passports indicated that they were Tutsi – the passports had to specify the ethnic origin (Hutu or Tutsi) from the days of Belgian colonial rule – they were generally murdered immediately, and women were often raped first. The persecuted sought safety in hospitals and churches, but the introductory quotations reveal what awaited them there.

In an orgy of violence, neighbours killed neighbours and thousands were robbed, mutilated, raped and murdered. After three months, the Tutsi rebel army Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) quickly marched up from its Ugandan exile into Kigali and put an end to the massacre. Hundreds of thousands of Hutu then fled from the country in turn, particularly to neighbouring Congo where the humanitarian catastrophe continued: tens of thousands died because of the pitiful humanitarian conditions or fell victim of the revenge of the Tutsi militias. In a vicious cycle of victim-perpetrator-victim, the underprivileged and discriminated-against Hutu became masters of the

life and death of the former upper class, the Tutsi, before becoming victims themselves once again. By that point the latest, mass violence was endemic in East Congo, playing its part in intensifying the conflict in and around Congo which cost an estimated total of over three million lives between 1998 and 2005.

In Rwanda, Paul Kagame, the leader of the RPF and the conqueror of Kigali, is now the President. From a superficial point of view, the country is at peace, but the consequences of the genocide are evident everywhere and not only in the form of orphan children whose fathers and mothers were butchered (in 1999, an estimated 45,000 to 60,000 households in Rwanda were headed by minors because the parents had been killed; these households included approximately 300,000 children), but also the hundreds of thousands of HIV victims who were infected by the mass rapes (UNICEF assumes a total of 250,000 to 500,000 rape victims). Many observers anticipate a new outbreak of violence in the short to medium term.

Rwanda reminded the world again that genocide prevention, as established after the horrors of the Holocaust in the 1948 UN 'Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide', was not effective. Bosnia, East Timor and Darfur are further proof of this. Alongside Armenia and the Holocaust itself, they have become symbols of genocidal violence and of what man is capable of doing to his fellow man. And this list does not even contain wars and violations of human rights.

If the concept of promoting and extending Genocide Studies as a discipline needed any further impetus, Rwanda clearly proved the necessity for it. Genocide Studies is devoted to a crime defined by international law according to the UN Convention quoted above as:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, such as:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The central criterion for the presence of a genocide is therefore the intention to destroy a specific, clearly defined group of people. In this sense, genocide is an 'identity crime', based on the precise definition of the victim group. This definition need not necessarily be based on ethnic markers, i.e. it does not have to be a question of actual or perceived 'races', even though this has particularly frequently been the case in historical terms.

Understanding and possibly preventing genocide primarily involves understanding these identity constructs. The humanities are therefore central

for understanding genocide, because assignments of identity within human societies are complex, discursive constructs. In order to decode them, the historical and philological disciplines have developed a sophisticated array of instruments: hermeneutics, deconstructivism and postcolonial theory, to name just a few.

Identity constructs exist in all societies, but genocide requires not only the definition of various identities, but also absolute, binary opposition. The victim group, which in cases of genocide is always defined by the perpetrator, and for that reason alone can be loaded with content at will, is not regarded as one group among many with which it could be possible to arrange a peaceful coexistence, but rather as an irreconcilable 'other' which must be driven out or, best of all, destroyed. This was the role imposed on the Jews by the Nazis or on the Tutsi by the Hutu.

It is the centrality of the identity, which leads to the fact that other measures apart from murder can be genocidal. The forcible transfer of children in order to raise them outside their original cultural group, as seen in Australia in the twentieth century, belongs to this category: namely, if the transfer is carried out with the aim of forcing the child to 'forget' its origins. As a result, the sustainability of cultural identity is impaired, and in the long term the group would be destroyed.

The construction of cultural identity in the initially quoted example of Rwanda is a complex procedure because the ethnic character of Hutu- and Tutsiness has been contested in recent scholarship, stressing instead the social construction of both group identities.

Historically speaking, identities grow over a long period of time, based on collective memories and they are constructed in a discursive process both within the respective groups and also between the groups. This is another reason why humanities, and in this sense above all the historical disciplines, are crucial for understanding them.

Yugoslavia

A good example of the significance of history in the collective formation of identity and its relationship with violence is found in the former Yugoslavian head-of-state Slobodan Milošević's now-famous speech on the Battle of Kosovo (1389) – in which a Serbian army was destroyed by the Ottoman Empire. In his 1989 speech, which he held at the Amselfeld battlefield on the occasion of the 600th anniversary, Milošević not only affirmed the Serbian claim of sovereignty over Kosovo (which led ten years later to the bombardment of the remainder of Yugoslavia, i.e. Serbia, by NATO), but he also used the opportunity to suggest that the defeat in battle was down to Serbian disunity. He called for Yugoslavian unity under a Serbian hegemony. Just a few months later, he reacted to the devolution of Slovenia and Croatia from Yugoslavia by declaring war. In the opinion of many commentators, he did not even flinch from ordering genocidal violence

in order to support his claim of sovereignty over at least the province of Bosnia-Herzegovina. During the years 1992–5, the war raged throughout the predominantly Muslim country and cost the lives of between 100,000 and 200,000 people. This was one of the reasons that led to Milošević being handed over to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague, which indicted him for his involvement ‘in a joint criminal enterprise, the purpose of which was the forcible and permanent removal of the majority of non-Serbs from large areas of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina’. However, before a final verdict could be reached the former President of Yugoslavia died in custody on 11 March 11 2006.

Remembering

History is not only important for understanding genocidal perpetrators; historical appraisal and reconstruction are also a central concern for the victims. As genocide as a crime not only aims at the physical destruction of the victim group but also seeks to eliminate all memory of it, as if it had never existed – even though the Nazis, for instance, wanted to place some Jewish artefacts into museums – a historic reconstruction itself can become an act of resistance against genocide. By keeping the memory of and knowledge about lost worlds alive, it is possible to counter the plans of genocidal criminals.

Moreover, memorial sites such as the central memorial of Yad Vashem in Israel or the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, to name just the largest on the Holocaust, can become crystallization points of a new identity. Because genocide has interrupted many traditions and destroyed cult objects and locations, it is mostly not possible to simply continue old traditions. Historical appraisal – and particularly also scientific examination, which can prevent the risk of drifting into myths and legends – is an important part of a process that is also central for healing deep wounds. Moreover, both healing and reconciliation between the dependents and descendants of the former perpetrators and victims, which is essential in the interests of a stable coexistence for the future, must begin with an acknowledgement of the historical reality and guilt.

The prime example of this is the German attempts at reconciliation with Israel after the Second World War. They included the merciless historical uncovering of the German crimes in the Third Reich, the reconstruction of Jewish life before the catastrophe and the rewriting of the national curricula from a post-racist perspective.

However, Germany is not the only country in history where conflicts are raging about an alleged or actual genocidal past. As an open investigation into the genocides at the end of the Ottoman Empire is not permitted, and as the debate about the United States’ own genocidal past is not yet really a subject of national interest in the USA, Australia must be granted the dubious honour of being the site of the most bitter battles concerning the

genocidal elements of settler colonialism. Without doubt, the treatment of the Aborigines is an open wound that has been festering for decades, and for which the healing process began only recently.

The issue of genocide in Australian history is divided into two parts. On the one hand, it involves the conquering and settlement of the country in the nineteenth century and, on the other hand, the so-called 'Stolen Generations', the victims of the government policy of removal, in which 'children of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent' were taken away from their families in order to be brought up in white foster families and to make them into good, white Australian citizens. In the century between 1869 and 1970, up to 100,000 children were stolen from their parents in this way and made into de-facto orphans.

The significance of this issue in Australian society was indicated by the speech by the newly elected Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 13 February 2008 at the Opening of Parliament. He apologized to the Aborigines in the name of the Australian government. There were surely more significant events in daily politics at the time, but on a symbolic level it is hardly possible to think of a more radical renunciation of the course of his conservative predecessor John Howard, who had always refused an apology.

The debate focuses on nothing less than the self-image of a society that would like to regard itself as 'Anglo-Saxon white' but has not been so for a long time, if indeed it ever was. It confronts a country that regards itself as a Western, enlightened enclave in a hemisphere that is coming more and more under the influence of Asia with its own history and with the fact that its foundation, as many historians argue, was based on genocide. In the raging history wars, the central theme is nothing less than the national identity, based on two mutually exclusive master narratives. One deals with the civilizing mission of the Europeans who, after a long exodus, settled in the Promised Land of Australia, cultivated it and made it fruitful; the other tells a story of violence, robbery, oppression, rape and murder against the Aborigines. While the Europeans are the victims of a wild nature and terrifying 'natives' in the first narrative, they are the perpetrators in the second.

The fact that Rudd fulfilled his campaign promise at the constitutive session of the new Parliament shows just how important is the question of how to deal with the past. Without any digression, he declared outright both the crime and the suffering of the 'Stolen Generations'. Although the campaign was described for a long time as a measure of social welfare, it clearly had racist overtones. In particular, the 'half-white' children were to be rescued from the 'damaging influence' of the Aborigines, and radical supporters believed that the consistent application of the plan would destroy the Aborigine culture as such over the course of several generations. Many observers describe these actions as genocide. Rudd was reluctant to use this term, just as he declined to mention the violence and land theft accompanying the European settlement.

However, the question about the continuity of genocidal violence, that is whether the policy of the state removal of children forms part of a longer tradition of a policy of destruction practised against the local people from the outset, is a much more serious question as it concerns no less than the legality of the acquisition of territory and so, in practical terms, the (moral and economic) basis of Australian society, and the issue of compensation.

The self-image of a nation is always partly based on its history. Critical monitoring is central, especially when such serious accusations as genocide are involved. Anyone who does not want to give up all hope of compensation and reconciliation, even if it is just a symbolic acknowledgement of past suffering, must recognize the central contribution of historical appraisal in the moral economy of present societies. This is crucially significant especially in the Western societies, whose claim to leadership is largely based on their moral integrity.

Rudd is therefore not alone with his apology. In recent years, there has been an international tendency towards an obligation to apologize publicly for crimes in the past, especially mass colonial crimes and the related excesses of violence. The reluctance and the rhetorical ambiguity involved indicate the importance of the issue of historical self-perception. For instance, although President Bill Clinton expressed regrets for slavery on a trip to Africa in 1998 and also condemned the profiteers in North America, he rebutted any direct responsibility by saying that the USA had not yet existed. In 2003, George W. Bush made a similar statement, once again in Africa. At home, such clear words are lacking, just as much as a central memorial on the Washington Mall, something which Afro-American representatives have demanded for years. The theme of slavery and more precisely its abolition moved the British Prime Minister Tony Blair in November 2006 to words of regret about the crimes of European slave trading; although he criticized the criminal involvement of British shipbuilders, ships' captains and merchants, he simultaneously linked the crime to the good deed by referring to the abolition of slave trading by the British Parliament. So it was possible to infer that the British Empire was not entirely bad: it also enabled the battle against slavery.

In this respect, Germany has gone the furthest: since it became public knowledge that there had already been a German genocide before the Holocaust, perpetrated between 1904 and 1908 by German colonial troops against the Herero and the Nama in the former German South-West Africa (today: Namibia), the public pressure on the government grew. In 2004, Germany therefore apologized officially to the Herero for the genocide. However, financial compensation was only extremely limited.

Nevertheless, questions of guilt and responsibility are only one part of the historical appraisal – even though it takes the limelight because of the emphasis in the international law definition on the punishment of the culprits; the other part involves the issue of healing and reparation. The

latter also includes the practical question of aid for the victims and their descendants.

Genocide Studies deal not only with forms and causes of mass violence, but also with its consequences, including processes of remembering and appraisal. Here again, there are learning processes, and a comparison and a comparative transfer can reduce suffering and help people. And not only in regions where genocides have taken place. As a consequence of the violence, the dependants of the victim groups have often been driven out of the country, and have fled all over the world. The Armenian diaspora is just one outstanding example. Directly affected people can be found everywhere, even in the rich countries of the west and north. It is also perfectly possible in increasingly multicultural societies that the 'victims' and the 'perpetrators' have to live together in a host country. It must therefore also be a priority for people in the rich host countries to prevent any export of violent structures into their own societies.

Prevention

Healing, reconciliation and punishment are not the only tasks in Genocide Studies: they also include prevention. However, this requires an understanding of the ongoing processes. The hope is that analysing them will help to prevent a repeat in the future.

Firstly, the question of understanding: How can perfectly ordinary men become mass murderers? How can the fathers of families become child murderers? How is it possible, as described in the opening quotation, that men hack off the arms of women and children? Can we understand at all? Probably not completely, but we can attempt to explain it. As one cannot simulate specific murder situations in a laboratory, the historical examples play a crucial role. They offer the advantage that it is easier to distinguish the causes and effects, the central facts from the superfluous details and the necessary from the sufficient conditions at a historical distance. Much information that was unknown to the contemporaries is accessible to the historian.

The best researched example is doubtless the Holocaust. This is partly due to the high level of scientific interest and partly to the fact that the perpetrating regime in Germany collapsed completely in 1945. As a result, no subsequent regime wanted to cover anything up, so all the archives were largely made accessible and both international and German courts could conduct criminal investigations, securing valuable sources (including cross-examinations with both victims and perpetrators) in the process. This remains the best foundation for establishing a profile of a perpetrator.

One of the most unsettling findings of the investigation of German firing squads, some of whom massacred thousands of people per day, was doubtless that peer pressure, together with excessive use of alcohol and a general brutalization due to the events of the war and earlier homicidal actions, proved to be sufficient to lead people to murder innocent victims

on command. Superior orders, or the explanation that they only killed on command, and only did so because otherwise they would have been killed themselves, proved to be a convenient postwar legitimization, but did not actually play a directive role during the actions themselves.

However, it proved to be significant that the soldiers no longer regarded the victims as humans of equal value. This process of dehumanization is again linked to complex processes of identity construction based on a binary coding of the world, as already discussed above. On the one hand, this finding is reassuring because it shows that most people do not simply become child murderers or rapists, but it is also unsettling because it suggests that other people would act in a similar way in similar circumstances. The events in Abu Ghraib and elsewhere provide a frightening confirmation of this.

It also means that the prevention of genocide must above all begin with the analysis, the critical appraisal and the possible avoidance of such binary discursive constructions and their Manichaean identities. The entire range of instruments of international law and the potential for intervention by the international community or by individual states will be useless if a genocidal situation is not recognized at all, or not in time. It is precisely here that Genocide Studies, with its basis in humanities, can play a crucial role. Historical and philological disciplines are therefore not an end in themselves, but also have a genuine task, apart from their purely intellectual involvement with literature, art and history, to which they must face up: the mechanisms of stigmatization and of 'othering', social inclusion and exclusion, the construction of superiority and inferiority, of authority and subservience, are discursive, and their effects can be felt in the daily lives of everyone. That is why they have to be revealed and deconstructed. And the humanities possess the historically developed, methodological and theoretical tools that are needed.

The significance of Genocide Studies, and of the humanities in general, are likely to increase further in the short and medium term. Climate change is altering all our certainties. It is the central challenge for the modern age. For our purposes, the question of whether it was triggered by humankind or is simply part of a normal cycle is secondary. Global warming, whether it is natural or not, will have far-reaching consequences, which will shake even the rich societies of the north to their very foundations. If the ocean water level rises by just 100cm, and almost all scientists in this subject agree on this, extensive coastal regions in Africa, Asia and even Europe will be flooded. If you superimpose a map of the initially flooded areas over a map of the most densely populated regions, they coincide to a frightening degree. This can all be modelled on a scientific basis, but the possible consequences go beyond the realm of the sciences. For instance, we can predict relatively certainly that the floods (not even to mention the consequences of climate change such as storms and droughts) will lead to massive flows of refugees, although it is not yet possible to say how many millions will be affected. Like

spreading waves, these fugitives will distribute themselves in all areas in the vicinity that are less affected by the floods, with a higher density in the more wealthy or generally better positioned regions. Presumably, two things will then happen: on the one hand, there will probably be violent reactions by the original population, where the intensity will depend on the shortage of resources that already existed or is worsened by the inflow of refugees; on the other hand, there will probably be a further migration of refugees towards neighbouring states and ultimately to the rich countries in the north (and possibly also China). In such cases, rich and poor are relative terms; the only certainty is that those who have lost everything in the floods will be relatively low in the social hierarchy.

Thus far, the forecasts are straightforward. It is much harder to predict when and where the provision and rejection of aid will turn into actual physical violence, or even genocide. It is far from certain that the violence will break out with equal intensity everywhere, or will automatically be aimed at the refugees. This depends on the social fabric of the respective regions. Here, definitions of identity, and the way in which they have come about, are key factors. In many regions, members of groups that regard themselves as related may live on both sides of a border. If refugees are received here, they may well be regarded as brothers and sisters. An example from European history should clarify this point. In the years between 1933 and 1945, non-Jewish Germans were persuaded to regard the 500,000 Jews living in Germany as a life-threatening danger that had to be eliminated. The Holocaust was a consequence of this. After the war, a total of 12 million ethnic Germans came from the Eastern German regions into the reduced territories of Germany. In the general state of need, these people were not popular. However, no-one called for them to be driven out or even murdered. One of the reasons for this was that they were regarded as brothers and sisters, as Germans – even in terms of racial ideology – whereas the Jews, who were both formally and culturally German, were seen as ‘absolute others’. This also means that migrations of refugees do not always have to end in genocide everywhere, but that this is certainly possible. This represents a large, vitally important and scarcely researched field for Genocide Studies and the humanities.

Environmental change, with its thousands of consequences, demands that the humanities take their task seriously. Science alone, which played a decisive role in causing the problem, is no longer capable of solving it. Any ideas of tackling environmental change with major technical projects should be approached with scepticism. Above all, there should be a dialogue between the advocates of this solution and the experts responsible for the results and unintended consequences of previous major projects, in order to show the supporters of technical progress the potential fallibility of their own position. There is plenty of historical evidence. As environmental change will fundamentally alter human society, it is time for the humanities to take over their role within scientific analyses.

Problems such as genocide are a concern for the whole of humankind. In a globalized world, in which images from afflicted regions in the world flash across the screens every evening, pictures of the wealth here also find their way to the poorest people on the planet. Trade and economics are global, but so are violence and misery. However, genocide is everyone's concern, even above and beyond the specific effects. It attacks the cultural diversity of human society and produces irreversible losses. It reduces people to mere objects and so represents a fundamental attack on human coexistence. As long as genocide is regarded as a viable political option by some leaders, stable peace will be impossible. The humanities are on the front line in this particular battle.