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Genocidal Bifurcations: The Innocent Sources of Criminal Choices

When looking at past events, we too often fall prey to the illusion that history is a linear process: the intentions motivating the actions of its heroes are closely matched to the effects. Moreover, the narratives – and not only the popular ones – are full of logical errors, such as perceiving a sequence of events to have a cause-and-effect relationship (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*). In the case of genocide, it is usually assumed that a plan of genocide preceded the extermination and that the perpetrators knew in advance what they were going to do and accepted the consequences of their choices. However, the process leading to acts of genocide is not linear but is a series of bifurcations,¹ from which a plan for the ultimate annihilation of victims gradually emerges. Due to the changing context, those who are not fundamentalists uncritically professing a genocidal ideology make choices that gradually turn them into accomplices. At the same time, they retain the conviction that they are moral persons who are conscientiously carrying out their work. The factors affecting their choices fall into

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¹ Here I use Immanuel Wallerstein’s concept to refer to the actions of individual and collective actors. Cf. I. Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*, Durham – London: Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 76–77.

various categories: an organizational culture; the norms and values associated with social roles; media representations of conflicts and wars; opportunities for promotion and enrichment; new sources of threats defined in accordance with racist ideology, and so forth.

Sociological consideration of these mechanisms is crucial for understanding genocidal mobilization. Genocide is an immense social project that requires the involvement of a wide range of citizens. There have always been too few radicals, fundamentalists, and ordinary sadists to exterminate hundreds of thousands of victims, including children. Rather than merely outlining macro-social factors such as militarism, anti-Semitism, or racism, an attempt should also be made to reconstruct the specific mechanisms behind genocide at the micro- and meso-social levels. In fact, confining such mechanisms to a single social level is deceptive (the most comprehensive criticism of the division has been made in actor-network theory²).

This article fits within the framework of genocide studies and historical sociology. It is based on the comparative study of three total genocides (of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1918; of Jews and Roma in Europe between 1941 and 1945; and of Tutsi and Twa in Rwanda in 1994) and selected twentieth-century partial genocides (of the Herero and Nama peoples in German South West Africa between 1904 and 1905; of Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia between 1941 and 1945; of Hutus in Burundi in 1972; of Khmer, Vietnamese, Cham, Chinese, Laotian and Thai people in Democratic Kampuchea between 1975 and 1979; and of the Maya in Guatemala between 1981 and 1983). I adopt Robert Melson's division into total and partial genocides.³ In this article, I omit discussion of the definition of genocide.⁴

² Cf. B. Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, A. Sheridan, J. Law (transl.), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

³ R.F. Melson, *Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust*, Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 27–29.

⁴ I accept the following definition of total genocide: it is “a sustained and purposeful action of perpetrators, aimed at the annihilation of a distinguished social category, both directly

Normal abnormality

In explaining wars, revolutions, and genocides, we too often seek exceptional social mechanisms to understand how people became criminals. However, a more fruitful strategy is to start with a “normal” (everyday and typical) reproduction of the social order. Daily activities and choices give rise to the emergence of states, nations, and societies. The process that serves to sustain these imagined entities does not necessarily lead to success. It is full of disputes, conflicts, and disorders that are perceived as social pathologies or threats to public order and security. Some people make choices that are against society’s recognized values and norms and lead to crimes, deviant acts, or national treason. However, in their masses, people behave as expected, sustaining the duration of states and nations. Consequently, there is a common belief that these are objectively existing entities.

It is thus useful to start with the premise that society cannot possibly exist. There are many arguments to reinforce the position, including the high intraspecific aggressiveness of human beings, their constant rivalry for limited resources, the rationality and egoism of actors, and the multiplicity of coexisting symbolic codes legitimizing opposing plans of action. What, then, makes it possible to overcome the impossibility of society? Various traditions in the social sciences have provided different answers. The basic one is that people have a tendency to live with (some) other members of their species, whom they perceive as belonging

(through murders) and indirectly, by stopping the biological and social reproduction of its members, regardless of their gender, age or social status, assuming that leaving the annihilated social category is impossible regardless of actions taken by exterminated individuals and that victims cannot escape the territory controlled by the perpetrators. Partial genocide is not about the annihilation of a given social category, but it involves murdering a significant part of the hostile population and thus seriously undermining its status, among other things, [...] it is non-discriminatory killing [...] the perpetrators do not allow the victims to change their social category.” L.M. Nijakowski, *Rozkosz zemsty. Socjologia historyczna mobilizacji ludobójczej* [*The Delight of Revenge: A Historical Sociology of Mobilization for Genocide*], Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2013, pp. 76–77.

to the same group. It is not my intent to discuss what factors have determined the evolution of these inclinations. In any case, the answer is not easy, particularly when we compare human beings with their close cousins: pygmy chimpanzees (bonobos) and ordinary chimpanzees.⁵ The birth of civilization required very specific ecological and social conditions, which others (Michael Mann,⁶ for instance) have reconstructed in detail. Importantly, there is no vicious circle in this reasoning (*circulus vitiosus* – society exists because man is a social animal): our dispositions incline us to live in hierarchical territorial groups. Before the emergence of civilization, people lived in very small groups of hunter-gatherers.

In the modern world, basic discursive mechanisms confirm the belief that human beings should be members of collective entities, particularly of nation states (the most popular idea). Benedict Anderson has created the concept of nations as imagined communities in which the importance of communication is stressed.⁷ Primary and secondary socialization, popular culture, and specialist discourses make people succumb easily to this illusion and attach great importance to membership in a national community, which is perceived as natural, homogenous, and eternal.⁸ The division of humankind into nations changes cognitive processes. Psychologists note that this phenomenon applies to all groups, even the most artificial ones.⁹ Not only do we want to be members of positive groups (the catalogue of positive features depends on the historical context), but we also easily defend our positive autostereotypes and negate foreign stereotypes. The

⁵ Cf. D.L. Smith, *The Most Dangerous Animal: Human Nature and the Origins of War*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007.

⁶ M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. I, *A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*, ed. 15, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 73–102.

⁷ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition, New York – London: Verso Books, 2006.

⁸ R. Wodak, R. de Cillia, M. Reisigl, K. Liebhart, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*, A. Hirsch and R. Mitten (transl.), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003.

⁹ Cf. R. Brown, *Group Processes: Dynamics within and between Groups*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Malden 2000.

reproduction of nations is, therefore, a continuous regeneration of oppositions and tensions. As Robert K. Merton points out, “Once stated, the classical formula of moral alchemy is clear enough. Through the adroit use of these rich vocabularies of encomium and opprobrium, the in-group readily transmutes its own virtues into others’ vices.”¹⁰ Therefore, societies exist as symbolic spaces, satisfying our sense of belonging, identification, identity, and the meaning of life.

Man also depends on others in many dimensions. Based on an advanced division of labor, modern societies turn human beings into links in complex and extensive exchange networks. In order to meet their needs, people must play certain social roles, make sanctioned transactions, and sometimes perform very unpleasant duties. Often the meaning of the work performed is only partially understood. Work is largely justified through references to expert discourses and therefore employees must trust various authorities. The pursuit of promotion in the hierarchy of wealth, prestige, and power requires involvement in social games and recognition of the rules of the game in specific fields (as defined by Pierre Bourdieu¹¹). Thousands of daily activities – from buying and eating food to watching films – become the building blocks of a social structure which is constantly being rebuilt. Our mutual dependence is so significant in modernity that it is no coincidence the apocalyptic imagination revealed in works of popular culture is so strong. Society exists as the result of everyday bustle and an assortment of plans that allow us to meet our needs.

These arguments already show that “normality” is a product of a very complex process, full of “sparks and production waste.” The same perspective should be adopted in relation to events such as revolution, war, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. These are products of the same “production line” – but where a program has

¹⁰ R. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, New York: The Free Press, 1968, p. 483.

¹¹ P. Bourdieu, L. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

been changed, something has broken down, or some group has decided to commit sabotage. As Raul Hilberg notes, the machinery of destruction was structurally no different from organized German society as a whole: the difference was only one of function. The machinery of destruction was the organized community in one of its specialized roles.¹² I am not alone in this approach. It is enough to recall Charles Tilly's explanation of the outbreak of revolutions.¹³ Many typical social processes, including those that recreate nation states in times of peace, lead to genocides. What is easy to accept at the level of anonymous and soulless structures is harder to understand in relation to specific people. Let us, therefore, take a look at their actions.

A new framework for action

In all the cases analyzed, genocide was associated with a war or other armed conflict – from total wars (World Wars I and II), through civil war (in Guatemala), to the uprisings of national groups (the Herero, Nama, Hutu).¹⁴ The course of the war clearly influenced the level of cruelty exhibited by rank-and-file soldiers, as was particularly evident in civil and partisan wars (e.g., the scorched-earth tactics in Guatemala¹⁵). A war must be seen as a new social framework, which changes people's actions even if they have not been called into the army. A war lowers people's sense of security, affects commodity prices, changes life

¹² Cf. Hilberg, *Zagłada Żydów europejskich*, Vol. III, J. Giebułtowski (trans.), Warszawa: Piotr Stefaniuk, 2014, p. 1229. In this article, I refer to the Polish edition of Hilberg's book as the author added new sections during translation, which are absent in the English version of the book.

¹³ C. Tilly, *European Revolutions, 1492–1992*, Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995.

¹⁴ Cf. M. Shaw, "The General Hybridity of War and Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2007, Vol. 9, Issue 3, pp. 461–473.

¹⁵ G. Grandin, "History, Motive, Law, Intent: Combining Historical and Legal Methods in Understanding Guatemala's 1981–1983 Genocide," in: R. Gellately, B. Kiernan (eds.), *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003, pp. 339–352.

plans, transforms internal politics, activates dormant ideological discourses, and so forth. It can be seen both as a catalyst of not always hidden antagonisms and as an umbrella protecting the state from international pressure, which is typically exerted in times of peace. When waging a war (and even losing it), a state is freer to act: the strength of soft diplomacy weakens; foreign public opinion (at least of certain key countries) can be ignored; and crimes can be put down to war conditions. Manus I. Midlarsky advances the thesis that “Any process that simultaneously increases both the threat to the state and its vulnerability, as well as the vulnerability of a targeted civilian population, also increases the probability of genocide.”¹⁶ In this respect, the security dilemma, which leads to the escalation of violence, is of key importance.¹⁷

Due to this new framework, the performance of occupational roles begins to be perceived differently. Work in a factory becomes a strategic element of the military effort; officers of various police groups – unless they are called into the army – are given new tasks; school-teaching requires explaining the just reasons of the community; and artists join (or are forced to join) propaganda campaigns to sustain morale. In the most general sense, fulfilling occupational and civic duties in a country that is carrying out a genocide is already a form of complicity, even if the matter is not ethically simple. Of course, the duration of the conflict and the related genocide is of much importance. Germans and their allies had several years in which to exterminate Jewish and Roma people. The Hutus exterminated Tutsi and Twa people during a bloody “one hundred days.”

A war changes the distribution of basic forms of capital (economic, social, and cultural, as distinguished by Pierre Bourdieu¹⁸), not only as result of intentional redistribution (e.g., confiscations, new

¹⁶ M.I. Midlarsky, *The Killing Trap: Genocide in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 4.

¹⁷ S.J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001, pp. 34–36.

¹⁸ P. Bourdieu, L. Wacquant, *An Invitation...*

tax rates) but also through restrictions or the disappearance of former sources of capital (e.g., limitations on international trade, embargos, sanctions, boycotts) or the emergence of new ones (e.g., the robbery of stigmatized groups, not solely the victims of genocide). The effects of war spread over social networks like waves and even those who are far from the frontlines feel its impact in different dimensions of their everyday life.

During times of war, cognitive processes change. Brutal propaganda seems to be an accurate description of reality and exclusivist ideological discourses spread through various communication channels. Butler writes that the same uncontrolled circulation may fragment the effects of war, making it difficult for people to focus on its actual costs, let alone to naturalize the effects of war as the supposed background of everyday life.¹⁹ Above all, killing enemies becomes – for a growing number of people – an act of patriotism. In times of peace, nationalistic discourses and *Realpolitik* serve to confirm these kinds of beliefs and shape the *habitus* of citizens.²⁰ Death becomes increasingly common and killing becomes the experience of ever more people. Under these conditions, the image of the enemy (either a real one, engaged in the fight, or an imagined one, such as the Jews or the Maya) is radicalized. Ultimately, the victims of genocide are excluded “from the universe of obligation”²¹ and thus it is easier to murder them.

Criminal choices

Because this article concerns the “innocent” sources of criminal choices, it does not take into account the careers of radicals who were ideologically indoctrinated and thus participated in

¹⁹ Cf. J. Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, London: Verso Books, 2016.

²⁰ L.M. Nijakowski, *Rozkosz zemsty...*, pp. 220–237.

²¹ H. Fein, *Genocide. A Sociological Perspective*, London and Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993, p. 36.

implementing a plan to annihilate particular groups: that is, leaders, soldiers, officers, officials, and other civilians of various ranks – either “white-collar murderers” or direct perpetrators. Of course, the factors that turned these individuals into genocidists can be found in their biographies (cf., the authoritarian personality concept developed by Theodor Adorno), but this is not the subject of my considerations (it is the subject of so-called psychohistory, whose achievements are, in my opinion, very controversial).

In the genocides studied, the radicals’ “heart of darkness” was surrounded by persons who were involved in the extermination for other reasons (even if they knew its main purpose) than the radicals were. In the legal sciences, the problem of the motivation of criminals carrying out acts of genocide has long aroused heated debate.²² In addition to other pragmatic purposes, which are discussed later in this article, war and genocide provide excellent conditions for sadists, psychopaths, and sociopaths, who can satisfy their hidden needs in the light of day and also gain recognition for their zealous service. Not all such people are those with a diagnosable disease, though. People who may be normal according to personality tests may desire the sense of omnipotence involved in taking a life. Wolfgang Sofsky’s idea of absolute power²³ is useful in this respect. Many historians have also documented crimes that seem to express the sense of a “criminal super-ego.”²⁴

Let us leave this category of perpetrators aside as well. They activate themselves during all conflicts and social disturbances; they also take specific jobs where they can gain success and recognition thanks to their psychopathic tendencies.²⁵ Criminal

²² D. Drózdź, *Zbrodnia ludobójstwa w międzynarodowym prawie karnym*, Warszawa: Oficyna Wolters Kluwer Polska, 2010, pp. 65-67.

²³ W. Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, W. Templer (trans.), Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1997, pp. 16-27.

²⁴ K.M. Mallmann, “Człowieku, dziś świętuje tysięczny strzał w potylicę. Policja Bezpieczeństwa a Shoah w Galicji Zachodniej,” in: D. Libionka (ed.), *Akcja Reinhardt. Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie*, Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2004, p. 100.

²⁵ K. Dutton, *The Wisdom of Psychopaths: What Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers Can Teach Us About Success*, Farrar, New York: Scientific American/Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2012.

regimes have often deliberately used such people for the implementation of their plans (a good example is SS Oscar Dirlewanger's special unit²⁶). What factors incline "fully normal" people to join a genocide network?

The key factors are those related to fighting and fear. An ongoing conflict radicalizes moods and thus facilitates acceptance of a demonic vision of the victims. Although the victims may seem completely innocent to an outside observer, the members of a given national community may be honestly convinced that they are only defending themselves against plotting enemies. Such a vision is particularly likely among people serving in uniformed formations, where the cost of not executing an order or exercising the right to withdraw from an action is enormous (as will be discussed later in the article). In practice, however, ordinary people are also affected by the atmosphere, and even if they do not personally kill anyone, they may easily report victims who are in hiding or refuse to help them. When genocide is carried out by a state apparatus (as in the cases analyzed), ordinary people are subject to growing pressure. Then hiding victims or even not informing the authorities about their hiding place may be treated as a crime and result in serious consequences. Moreover, how many people have the competence and sources of information – not to mention civil courage – to disagree with the state authorities' interpretation of the criminal activities of their victims?

A digression is necessary at this point. If all genocides had been carried out by states, the answer to the question of genocidal mobilization would be simpler. By gaining control over a state and using its strength, radical factions can carry out their genocidal plan, even if the silent or active opposition is numerous. However, in addition to the cases discussed in this article, we can point to genocides that were not conducted by a state. Such crimes were

²⁶ C. Ingrao, *The SS Dirlewanger Brigade: The History of the Black Hunters*, New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2011.

particularly likely to be committed in colonies:²⁷ for instance, the extermination of the Aborigines in Australia or the residents of the Congo Free State between 1885 and 1908. In the first case, the extermination policy was conducted by settlers, regardless of the actions of British officials, who used prisoners and free colonists to deal with the autochthonous people (e.g., the lieutenant-governor of Tasmania, George Arthur, waged the Black War, leading to the extermination of the Tasmanians²⁸). As Sven Lindqvist says, killing a black person was considered no worse than shooting a dog.²⁹ These crimes were often committed for material motives – the perpetrators were protecting sheep and cattle from the natives, who hunted them after being pushed off their lands. In the case of the Congo Free State, King Leopold II of Belgium had to create a private army, because the territory was not a Belgian colony. In 1888, he established the Force Publique. While many Belgian officers served there, they were formally on vacation. Moreover, King Leopold used the services of soldiers from other countries and all kinds of criminals.³⁰ Furthermore, focusing on states can be misleading: there are many indications that in the future, international corporations may commit genocides in order bloodily to suppress the resistance of indigenous populations opposing the exploitation of natural resources.³¹

Returning to the motivation of citizens, their tendency to submit to the decisions of the authorities or to take spontaneous actions against victims can never be explained by fear alone. It is always complemented by hope and the sense of agency associated

²⁷ For more on this topic, see: M. Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

²⁸ B. Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur*, London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, pp. 273–280.

²⁹ Cf. S. Lindqvist, *Terra Nullius: A Journey through No One's Land*, New York: New Press, 2007.

³⁰ A. Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

³¹ Cf. A. Domosławski, *Śmierć w Amazonii. Nowe eldorado i jego ofiary*, Warszawa: Wielka Litera, 2013.

with a positive project, which is often a utopian vision offered by ideologists (in the cases of the total genocides analyzed here, these were the Young Turks, the Nazis, and supporters of Hutu Power). The victims are humiliated in the public discourse and by everyday discriminatory practices in order to promote the community of the perpetrators, even if that community's rank-and-file members have to deal with frustrating social conditions. In the ideological model of scapegoating developed by Peter Glick, "The attractiveness of a scapegoat ideology is not determined solely by its ability to explain frustrating events but by its ability to serve a variety of social-psychological needs heightened by difficult life conditions."³² A sense of moral superiority, the right to judge others in everyday situations, and not recognizing the distant consequences of seemingly minor institutional exclusions, are just some elements of the choices that put people on the perpetrators' side. The fact that perpetrators and accomplices of genocide can perceive themselves as law-abiding and moral persons is a very important source of genocidal mobilization. Harald Welzer emphasizes that collective violence is usually not the result of an incomprehensible eruption but of repetitive social processes that have a beginning, middle phase, and end and are the work of thinking people, not madmen. He adds that the relationship between mass crime and morality is mutually conditioned rather than contradictory. There could be no mass murder without morality.³³ The perpetrators of genocides, including the direct murderers, were often convinced that they had performed a hard and thankless job that would ensure a peaceful and prosperous future for their nation and families. Heinrich Himmler gave an ideological interpretation of

³² P. Glick, "Sacrificial Lambs Dressed in Wolves' Clothing: Envious Prejudice, Ideology, and the Scapegoating of Jews," in: L.S. Newman, R. Erber (eds.), *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 133.

³³ Cf. H. Welzer, *Sprawcy. Dlaczego zwykli ludzie dokonują masowych mordów*, with contributions by M. Christ, M. Kurkowska (transl.), Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2010, pp. 15 and 42.

this conviction in a famous speech delivered on October 4, 1943 in Poznań.³⁴

As has already been mentioned, citizens in uniform are even more easily affected by genocidal pressure, and not only in relation to criminal orders carried out for fear of a court martial. Today we know that police officers and soldiers often had the right to withdraw from the mass execution of defenseless victims. However, guided by solidarity with their colleagues, afraid of being ridiculed, and mindful of their careers, they participated in the extermination. Christopher Browning's study of Reserve Police Battalion 101 is most often referenced in this context.³⁵ The battalion consisted of ordinary middle-aged police officers from Hamburg. On July 13, the commander of the battalion informed his subordinates of the objectives of the plan (part of Operation Reinhard) and gave them the opportunity to withdraw from the execution. Only twelve policemen and one officer did so. Later, several more policemen refused to carry out the order. Due to peer pressure and the content of autostereotypes, the withdrawals were perceived as a betrayal of colleagues and as cowardice. This was sufficient to make non-fanatical officers into soldiers of the Holocaust. Participation in law enforcement activities, daily violence, and a sense of entrapment changed "ordinary Germans" and prepared them to follow the collective of murderers at a critical moment. Seemingly minor choices prepared them for the final engagement in extermination. "Mass murder became an integral part of the everyday life of the officers of the Security Police and Security Service and almost served as a medium of the culture of violence integrating the community."³⁶ In this sense, violence should be seen as a structure-creating factor. Its use is accompanied by a change in cognitive processes and the adoption

³⁴ R. Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust*, New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

³⁵ Ch.R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.

³⁶ K.M. Mallmann, *Człowieku, dziś świętuje...*, p. 95.

of new semantic frameworks. The more protracted a conflict, the more insidious the impact of the culture of violence. This can particularly be seen in the cycles of bloody revenge carried out by the Hutu and Tutsi – beginning with the Hutu revolution which led to the independence of Rwanda.³⁷

A clear example of these mechanisms is the massacre of children in Bila Tserkva.³⁸ Initially, the youngest were saved from the execution of Jews. However, the Nazis did not know what to do with them. The children were detained in scandalous conditions, leading the soldiers to protest and talk with their chaplains (Catholic and Protestant), who then submitted a report. Rhodes writes that despite all the interest and indignation of the soldiers and priests no one had the idea of simply giving the suffering children something to drink—they were, after all, little Jews.³⁹ A heated debate led to the decision to kill the children and Ukrainian mercenaries were forced to execute the order. Due to the growing irritation of the commanders and the need to solve the problem of the children – who belonged to a category excluded from the universe of moral obligation and were a threat to discipline – extermination seemed the only way to cut the Gordian knot.

Attempts to deal with bureaucratic chaos and institutional problems could also make extermination seem the best option. For example, overcrowded prisons and long legal procedures prompted German officials and officers in Warsaw to tighten their measures against Jewish “criminals” and speed their extermination.⁴⁰ As Philip Zimbardo has explained in detail, the growing pressure from environmental variables overrode the internal characteristics of the actors.⁴¹

³⁷ P.H. Kosicki, “The Rwandan Genocide: Theory and Practice,” *International Journal of Sociology*, 2007, 37(1), pp. 10–29.

³⁸ R. Rhodes, *Masters of Death...*

³⁹ Cf. *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ B. Engelking, J. Grabowski, „Żydów łamiących prawo należy karać śmiercią”. „Przestępczość” Żydów w Warszawie 1939–1942, Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2010, pp. 148–150.

⁴¹ P. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*, London: Rider, 2007.

Vertical mobility and the hope for promotion were also of much significance. The genocides analyzed here were connected not only with armed conflicts but also with great social transformations, which brought various new groups and social categories to power. Radical factions of politicians, soldiers, and officials won the struggle for power and could therefore implement their genocidal plans. In turn, the implementation of these plans gave various people a chance to expand or gain power. "Hence, the destruction of the Jews represented an expansion, always an added burden, but sometimes also a new challenge and an aggrandizement of power."⁴² The positions of the people involved were quite varied, ranging from high-ranking politicians and officials to frontline commanders and local administrators. Hilberg writes that by its very nature, the process of extermination was unlimited. Therefore, the scope of power became increasingly boundless, the range of freedom expanded, and competences grew.⁴³ Due to the special nature of genocidal actions, individuals acquired institutional autonomy and could issue orders independently of many other local authorities. This, in turn, had a huge impact on the mood of the actors and their final place in the social hierarchy. "One animal cows another to its heels: That is the archetypal situation of organizational life and the shaper of classes and cultures. [...] the most powerful effects on man's behavior are the sheer volume of occupational deference he gives and gets."⁴⁴ During the Rwandan genocide in 1994, persons who did not want to execute the criminal commands of local warlords were in some cases considered traitors and murdered.

Opportunities for promotion affected the hierarchy of prestige. For example, the Third Reich multiplied the "capital of recognition" by creating many hierarchical organizations in which ordinary

⁴² Cf. Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders. The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945*, New York: Harper Perennial 1993, p. 25.

⁴³ Cf. *Idem*, *Zagłada Żydów...*, p. 1230.

⁴⁴ R. Collins, *Conflict Sociology: Toward an Explanatory Science*, London, New York and San Francisco: Academic Press, 1975, pp. 63 and 64.

Germans could be promoted.⁴⁵ Similarly, the frustrated young Hutu could feel better in the Interahamwe paramilitary militia (literally “those who act together”) and the smaller Impuzamugambi militia (literally “those who share a common goal”).⁴⁶ The phenomenon, however, is much wider. Discriminatory social practices that serve to bring about the gradual dehumanization of the victims open new occupational opportunities for other people. Removing a superior artist, lawyer, or doctor provides a unique chance for an inferior person to take his or her position. In such cases, there was often the temptation to accuse someone of belonging to the category of the victims, even if there was no conclusive evidence to prove it. Taking over someone else’s job or office may seem innocent compared to murder. However, this is part of the same genocidal mobilization. In Rwanda, bringing the perpetrators of genocide to justice was a great challenge due to the extermination of the country’s lawyers.⁴⁷

Being a total process, genocide often opened up all kinds of previously occupied social niches, particularly when the victims were so-called middleman minorities, that is, those who had jobs situated between the producers and the consumers (traders, lenders, etc.), such as the Jews in Europe, the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, or the Chinese in Southeast Asia.⁴⁸ However, this phenomenon applies only to modern societies with an advanced division of labor. In the case of colonial genocides (as in German South West Africa⁴⁹), extermination also meant the depletion of slave labor resources. Such depletion caused disturbances in

⁴⁵ Cf. S. Marks, *Why Did They Follow Hitler? The Psychology of National Socialism*, Ostfildern: Patmos, 2011.

⁴⁶ J. Regina-Zacharski, *Rwanda. Wojna i ludobójstwo*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2012, p. 96.

⁴⁷ P. Akhavan, “The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda: The Politics and Pragmatics of Punishment,” *The American Journal of International Law*, 1996, Vol. 90, No. 3, pp. 501–510.

⁴⁸ E. Bonacich, “A Theory of Middleman Minorities,” *American Sociological Review*, 1973, No. 38, pp. 583–594.

⁴⁹ Cf. D. Olusoga, C. Erichsen, *The Kaiser’s Holocaust: Germany’s Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism*, London: Faber & Faber, 2010.

the plans of genocide and sometimes led to a cessation of mass murder.

The significance of the fact that participation in genocide offers a chance to obtain material means cannot be overestimated. The opportunity may be to become rich or to simply receive funds for the normal existence of a family. As Saul Friedländer notes, "Throughout the twelve years of the Third Reich, looting of Jewish property was of the essence."⁵⁰ In the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians fell victim to soldiers and members of the Special Organization and also to neighbors, residents of settlements located on the route of deportation marches, and to Kurdish troops (the Turks even organized slave fairs where they sold Armenian children kidnapped from convoys).⁵¹ In the first period of Germany's war with the Soviet Union,⁵² the Germans both supported the pogroms and created a system that encouraged members of the occupied nations to denounce escaped and hiding Jews.⁵³ The "golden harvest"⁵⁴ of the victims' goods brought lasting benefits to at least some of the recipients. In Rwanda in 1994, Hutu neighbors treated robbery as a reward and as historical justice. They could seize land, which they desperately needed, and movable property. Killing cattle was an opportunity to organize feasts and have fun, but it was also a symbolic victory over the victims, who were depicted as rich breeders exploiting the poor Hutu.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ S. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*, Harper Collins, 2009, p. 497.

⁵¹ Cf. Y. Ternon, *The Armenians: History of a Genocide*, R.C. Cholakian (trans.), Delmar, New York: Caravan Books, 1981.

⁵² Ch.R. Browning, with contributions by J. Matthäus, *The Origins of the Final Solution*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press and Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004.

⁵³ Cf. J. Grabowski, „Ja tego Żyda znam!“. *Szantażowanie Żydów w Warszawie, 1939–1943*, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Warszawa 2004; B. Engelking, J. Grabowski (eds.), *Zarys krajobrazu. Wieś polska wobec zagłady Żydów 1942–1945*, Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011.

⁵⁴ J.T. Gross, I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

⁵⁵ For economic sources of genocide, cf. P. Uvin, "Rwanda's Lack of Resources and Extreme Poverty Provided the Breeding Grounds for Genocide," in: Ch. Fisanick (ed.), *The Rwanda Genocide*, San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2004, pp. 47–56; For witnesses' accounts, cf. J. Hatzfeld, *Sezon maczet*, J. Giszczak (trans.), Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2012.

During genocide, actors belonging to the “nation of the perpetrators” may have separate interests. This does not automatically mean that they stand on the side of the victims, who are treated like objects in most cases. For example, during World War II, entrepreneurs and Wehrmacht officers profiting from the slave labor of Jews had to be forced to release their employees for slaughter.⁵⁶ Similarly, in the case of the Armenian genocide, some officials refused to exterminate their slave laborers in accord with the policy of their leaders, in order to profit from their work.⁵⁷ The implementation of the genocidal plan was tantamount to a deterioration of the officials’ economic situation. Victims were often defended as a slave labor force, providing significant resources of economic capital, rather than as people deserving to live.

Genocidal trajectories

In most cases, the analysis cannot be limited to one factor that drives people to criminal choices. What is more, just as genocidal mobilization is stretched over time, the biographical trajectory of perpetrators is crucial for their subsequent decisions. Their past choices determine their future decisions, thus closing some ways of action and making others natural and obvious. When looking at the outcome of this process, we may be tempted to use deterministic patterns. However, genocidists may be faced with more than one dilemma; they must sometimes make painful choices at the crossroads of life paths that will determine their future and change their psyche (it cannot be ruled out that some perpetrators followed a trajectory of suffering⁵⁸). People have

⁵⁶ D. Libionka, *Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie. Zarys problematyki*, Lublin: Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, 2017, pp. 187–189.

⁵⁷ Cf. Y. Ternon, *The Armenians...*

⁵⁸ G. Reimann, F. Schütze, “‘Trajectory’ As a Basic Theoretical Concept for Analyzing Suffering and Disorderly Social Processes,” in: D.R. Maines (ed.), *Social Organization and Social Process: Essays in Honor of Anselm Strauss*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991, pp. 333–357.

a tendency to rationalize and justify their deeds and so they often forget their previous doubts.

The communities of the perpetrators perceived themselves as moral and as undertaking a difficult task to ensure the great future of their nation. Under the influence of propaganda, institutional changes, and various ideological discourses, the actors changed their view of the world and excluded their victims from the universe of moral obligation. At the same time, they used emotional energy resources (as defined by Randall Collins), multiplied by rituals of political interaction (which grow in number in authoritarian countries preparing for war). High emotional energy gives a feeling of confidence and enthusiasm for social interaction; low emotional energy is the lack of Durkheim's solidarity.⁵⁹ In such cases, "righteous anger" is easily directed against "heretics, scapegoats, and other outcasts."⁶⁰ This kind of preparation of a community's members facilitates not only the legitimization of actions aimed at victims, but also enhances the community members' personal commitment. It is worth noting in addition that Collins has used his theory to explain violence, but for now it does not explain collective violence that has the scale and extent of genocide.⁶¹

Obviously, those who are not radicals find it easier to remain convinced of their moral purity if they do not have to kill the victims themselves. In modern countries, it is easy to become a "white-collar perpetrator," because the complexity of the social machinery requires many specialists in the background. This leads to a kind of adiaphorization, that is, a system's procedures and actions become separated from moral reflection.⁶² In the Third Reich, improving the techniques for the cremation of victims may

⁵⁹ R. Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 127.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 151.

⁶¹ R. Collins, *Violence. A Micro-Sociological Theory*, Oxford and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

⁶² Z. Bauman and D. Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

have been treated by the engineers, laborers, and entrepreneurs involved as an action unrelated to the Final Solution. However, that genocide would not have operated so smoothly without efficiently operating furnaces in the extermination camps.

In order to ensure their sense of security, social advancement, and resources from various kinds of capital (a “natural” desire), people make use of the opportunities opened up by genocidal mobilization. Consequently, they become increasingly dependent on the main actors of the genocide, who are fully aware of the ultimate goal, which is extermination. The ideological indoctrination of all the members of the perpetrators’ community is neither possible nor necessary. Guided by their own and their family’s good, many of them will make choices that allow society to annihilate its victims. This does not mean that people become puppets. Being reflexive creatures, they may respond to existing conditions and pressures in a variety of ways. It is primarily unplanned consequences that reinforce a genocidal network (Margaret Archer emphasizes this aspect of agency).⁶³

Under such conditions, the protection of victims often becomes a heroic choice. Even if not threatened with the death penalty for providing help, those who are actively involved in supporting stigmatized people are moved away from other members of their nation. The sense of isolation, loneliness, and of living a lie is too high a price for many. The same person may engage in seemingly contradictory actions: participate in robbing, discriminating against, or even murdering victims, and, at the same time, help individuals sentenced to annihilation.⁶⁴

The genocides analyzed differ in the number and character of the groups of direct perpetrators involved. The extermination of the

⁶³ M. Archer, “Jak porządek społeczny wpływa na ludzkie sprawstwo? Refleksyjność jako mechanizm pośredniczący między strukturą a sprawstwem,” T. Skoczyła (trans.), in: A. Mrozowiecki, O. Nowaczyk, I. Szlachcicowa (eds.), *Sprawstwo. Teorie, metody, badania empiryczne w naukach społecznych*, Zakład Wydawniczy „Nomos”, Kraków 2013, pp. 19–35.

⁶⁴ B. Campbell, “Contradictory Behavior during Genocides,” *Sociological Forum*, 2010, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 296–314.

Herero and Nama in German South West Africa is at one end of the range. While troops sent from Germany were the main force in this case, German settlers were also involved in the extermination. The Armenian genocide should be located at the other end of the range. In addition to the Turkish army and other formations, units of ethnic minorities and a wide range of Turkish civilians took part in the extermination. Thus, the perpetrators were differently mobilized. In each case, however, they would not have been able to act effectively without the support of the social background, in the broad sense.

Conclusion

The concept outlined in this article needs to be examined in more detail, yet it shows that genocidal mobilization cannot be analyzed solely in terms of the intentional actions of perpetrators who are aware of a genocidal plan. The extermination of entire nations and ethnic groups can be conducted because many people, guided by values or norms that we might accept or even commend in a different context, make numerous criminal choices. These choices are made partly due to the structural pressure of circumstances (an ongoing war, a change in the rules of the game, a new distribution of capital) and are partly derived from dispositions shaped in the course of primary and secondary socialization. Yet, they always require the reflexive mediation of “objective” social forces.

The subject of this article has already been discussed in many studies. Some of the theses are associated with three authors in particular: the historian Raul Hilberg, author of the monumental work *The Destruction of the European Jews*;⁶⁵ the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, author of *Modernity and the Holocaust*,⁶⁶ and the philosopher Hannah Arendt, author of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*:

⁶⁵ R. Hilberg, *Zagłada Żydów...*

⁶⁶ Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1989.

*A Report on the Banality of Evil.*⁶⁷ In conclusion, I must point out the similarities and differences between my concept and those developed by these authors. Above all, these authors primarily dealt with the genocide of Jews during World War II. I have based my concept on the comparative study of a dozen or so cases of total or partial genocides. Thus, the universalization of the model has required the omission of factors specific to the German genocide, which was carried out by a modern, economically developed state. The aforementioned authors focused on officials, officers, politicians, and ideologists. The ground-breaking nature of Hilberg's research was to show the importance of "normal" administrative processes for the Holocaust. Bauman described a modern state and its associated symbolic codes in a similar way.⁶⁸ Arendt (the least original of the three) emphasized that average officials and officers (not solely Nazi radicals) were also involved in administering the genocide. In the model presented in this article, I try to take account of the motivations of all types of actors, including civilians not working in public administration. Unlike Hilberg, I additionally stress the importance of the earlier moral consensus for genocide. Hilberg observed "The old moral order did not break through anywhere along the line. This is a phenomenon of the greatest magnitude,"⁶⁹ As a phenomenon of the greatest magnitude,⁶⁹ Hilberg observed and then looked for the defense mechanisms used by officials and officers. In my opinion, the "old morality" in many cases provided a sufficient framework for participation in wartime extermination. This is one of the most disturbing lessons from the study of genocides.

⁶⁷ H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Penguin Books, 1984.

⁶⁸ When commenting on Bauman's concept, Yehuda Bauer noted that "It is difficult to see in these statements anything but a further, admittedly forceful and well-argued repetition of theses presented in Raul Hilberg's monumental book entitled *Destruction of the European Jews* some thirty years earlier. The difference would seem to lie in Bauman's attempt to do what Hilberg was very careful not to do: to answer the question of what motivated the bureaucracy to do what it did" (*Rethinking the Holocaust*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, p. 71).

⁶⁹ Cf. R. Hilberg, *Zagłada Żydów...*, Vol. III, p. 1257.

**Genocidal Bifurcations:
The Innocent Sources of Criminal Choices**

The present paper aims to investigate the causes of genocidal mobilization associated with the involvement of ordinary people. I discuss the “innocent causes” of criminal choices made by perpetrators who are not leaders, sadists or radicals. To this end, I compared three total genocides, of Armenians, Jews, Romani, Tutsi and Twa, and selected partial genocides. My analysis proves that entire nations or ethnic groups may be exterminated because many people make criminal choices which are motivated by values and norms that in other circumstances would be considered acceptable or even commendable. These choices are made partly due to the structural pressure of circumstances (an ongoing war, a change in the rules of the game [*les champs*], a new distribution of capital) and are partly derived from dispositions shaped in the course of primary and secondary socialization. Yet, they always require the reflexive mediation of “objective” social forces.

Keywords: genocide studies, genocidal mobilisation, motives of the ordinary perpetrators.