

## GENOCIDE IN THE SHADOW OF DEMOCRACY The Psycho-Politics of Modern Mass Murder

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*I denne artikel håber jeg at vise, at storpolitik (læs: folkemord) er yderst menneskelig og derfor også psykologisk. Psykologi har definitivt meget at tilføre både historieforskning og den politiske videnskab, siden historie er politik og politik ER psykologi. Psykologer må ikke være bange for de store processer. Når man blot fokuserer på det individuelle i vor globaliserede verden, risikerer man at trivialisere sig selv og sine argumenter i den samfundsmæssige debat. Hvis psykologien vil noget mere end at lindre privat lidelse inden for klinikkens lyddæmpede vægge, må den få øjnene op ikke kun for det sociale i mennesket, men også for det menneskelige i det sociale og det socialpsykologiske i samfundets systemer. Denne artikel er et eksempel på denne indgangsvinkel. Jeg udforsker den psyko-politiske sammenhæng mellem demokrati og folkemord, både gennem at skitsere de historiske og systemiske forbindelser og ved at undersøge den farlige interaktion mellem voldsregimer og deres demokratiske modparter. Det er klart, at folkemord er enorme historiske og politiske processer, men dette betyder ikke, at de ikke også er højst psykologiske begivenheder.*

»In democracies, men are placed in office through popular elections. Yet, once installed, they are no less in authority than those who get there by other means.«

– Stanley Milgram<sup>1</sup>

»We must leave it to yourself to decide [whether] the end proposed should be their extermination, or their removal...The same world would scarcely do for them and us.«

– Thomas Jefferson<sup>2</sup>

On July 31, 1932, the Nazis won the national elections in Germany and prepared to assume power. Thirteen years later, large parts of the world lay in rubble and millions of innocent people had died. Approximately six mil-

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1 *Obedience to Authority* (1974), p. 196.

2 In a letter to Indian fighter George Rogers Clark; retrieved from [www.bluecorncomics.com/july4th.htm](http://www.bluecorncomics.com/july4th.htm)

lion Jews had perished in the gas chambers and the countryside of Eastern Europe. A nightmare unlike any other had befallen the heartland of Europe; until then, the core of high civilisation. The question »How could this happen?« soon became a cliché in the works of Western intellectuals; »Never again!« even more so on the lips of the survivors. And yet the question remained topical, as the determined outcry proved itself void of any real political substance.

Genocides have persisted after World War II, and every occurrence is popularly explained in terms of pre-modern backlashes, such as tribalism, ancient hatreds, and failed democracy. But these interpretations miss the point entirely, and for good reason. Indeed, if we were to fully acknowledge the roots of modern genocide, it would cast an incriminating shadow on the development and conduct of our very own civilisation, and some of the moments in history that we have learnt to praise would take on a more sinister quality. July 31, 1932 in Germany provides a clue to this puzzle, but the truth is more disturbing, as the preconditions for the Nazis and the Holocaust did not actually originate in feudal Germany but in progressive France (Wokler, 2000). As Jürgen Habermas contends, Nazism may have been a consequence of Germany's failure to follow Britain and France in maintaining the fragile balance between universalistic and particularistic elements of national identity (cf. Fleming, 2003, p. 99). But the theoretical and political developments necessary to modern genocide were nonetheless liberal revolutionary inventions; that is, the ideas of nation-state, democracy, and the rights of man. All these things were (at least partly) realised in 1776 and 1789, and the prerequisites for modern genocide slipped into existence with them.

In this article, I will start by considering this darker tendency, and show how modern ethnic cleansing and genocide<sup>3</sup> result from the same ideological foundations that democracy, and indeed modernity itself, rest upon. The first section of the article will thus be concerned with the *structural* links between democracy and modern genocide: the birth of the nation-state, its democratic ideals, and their impact on subsequent episodes of ethnic violence. Seen through the lens of modern genocide, it becomes terribly clear that the process that led to the nation-state and its democracy was as much a definition of the *Other* as it was a creation of »We the People.« For an »us« to exist, there must naturally be a »them.« Earlier in history, the fundamental dividing lines had followed class denominations. Now democracy challenged these divisions and created new ones, between citizen and non-citizen. Combining with the dawn of racism and the technological bloom of modern society, the road to total genocide was being paved.

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3 Ethnic cleansing is here understood as the removal – through murder or deportation – of an ethnic group from a geographical area, whereas genocide is the intentional attempt to destroy a whole group, as that group is defined by the perpetrators. The former term is, of course, a euphemism, borrowed from the *genocidaires* themselves.

But democracy as a system is not only linked to modern genocide through the same historical processes, and democracies do not only indirectly contribute to mass murder. There are also direct *causal* relationships between democratic and genocidal regimes, as powerful democracies destabilise states and whole regions that eventually resort to genocide. Furthermore, when genocides are either imminent or unfolding in these regions, Western democracies almost always fail to prevent or halt them.

Virtually unhindered, the perpetrators are then free to act out their evil intentions. Towards the end of the article, I will briefly describe the psychology of these genocidal killers, as they proceed with their societal project. How does the individual become a killer within this larger framework? Which social forces induce him to comply, and what psychological processes transform him into a perpetrator?

For now, let's begin by examining the interrelated phenomena of modernity, nation-state, democracy, and genocide – and explore how democracy and modern genocide are not mutually exclusive phenomena, as we would like to believe, but instead historically linked processes.

## 1. Some Structural Links between Democracy and Mass Murder

Democracy is usually portrayed in immensely positive ways. It is the most fundamental Western value, upon which our whole modern civilisation rests. It is described as good, progressive, and intrinsically hostile to authoritarianism or any kind of fundamentalism. Post 9/11, it has taken on an almost spiritual dimension – to counter the terrorists' totalitarian worldview – as the summit of human civilisation and the natural enemy of Evil.

There is, of course, much truth to this vision, however simplistic and glorified its presentation may be. The brighter sides of democracy are well known. It is true that humanity has never before enjoyed a more inclusive, accountable, and universalistic political system. In principle, everyone is equal before the law and protected from arbitrary state violence; everyone has the right to liberty and opportunity – *in principle*. The real picture is far more sombre and complex. For democracy casts a distinctly less favourable shadow back through the last few centuries; a shadow that covers exclusion, ethnic cleansing, and ultimately genocide.

### *1.1 The Symbiosis between Democracy and Nationalism: Imagining the »People«*

Before the French and American revolutions, empires and kingdoms usually consisted of various linguistic communities. Their borders were vague delineations on the outskirts of the central powers' spheres of influence, and class – rather than nationality – prevailed as the main form of social

categorisation. It was impossible to imagine a coherent national community because there could be no such unity (Anderson, 1991).

The French Revolution was a reaction to this ideology of legitimate class hierarchy. It relaxed the social constraints of the class system, and imposed the liberal ideals of equality before the law, the rights of man, and the rule of the people. In the political vacuum that followed the decapitation of the monarch, these new definitions of the social world required a fundamental reorganisation of society. If the »People« were to rule and enjoy equality before the law, it became essential to establish whom the »People« actually were and what was to be ruled.

The »citizen« and »nation-state« became the practical responses to these requirements of the democratising process, suggesting that the new political system might in fact be inseparable from nationalism (Nodia, 1994). The nation-state was defined as the territorial and cultural unit of the nation, and the citizen was the individual who fell under this territorial and cultural definition. However, this was not simply a matter of distinguishing already existent cultural entities. The establishment of territorial borders was an artificial ordering from above, as the modern state reduced and simplified complex phenomena in order to control and manipulate them centrally. Since the conceptions of democracy and the nation-state would only be coherent if an actual *nation* could be perceived, the modern nation-states – intent on long-term sustainability and stability in the international economy – launched campaigns of assimilation. This was novel in history, as the new elites were the first rulers to require that their subjects actually *identify* with their rule (Levene, 2005). In the eyes of the nationalist, the national community thus has an egalitarian nature, since we are all fundamentally *the same* (Wimmer, 2002). The national revolution is a social and societal project, aimed at making everyone equal. Perpetrators of genocide are revolutionary in this sense, as they transgress all moral boundaries in their pursuit of such *sameness* – an equality that will supposedly entail societal bliss.

This strain of social engineering would have been inconceivable in earlier times, when the order of things was pre-ordained by God. Modernity's intellectual endeavour, on the other hand, was free of such limitations. It took place in an increasingly secular world. As the power of the Church rapidly declined in Europe, a new, »scientific« way of viewing the world came to dominate, and with it, an optimistic belief in progress – indeed infinite progress. The disciples of the new Age set out to categorise, understand, and improve the world. As the anthropologist of genocide, Alexander Hinton (2002), writes:

This optimistic bubble of ideas contributed greatly to the emergence of the key metanarrative of modernity – the teleological myth of »progress« and »civilization.« On the one hand, the human condition was

portrayed as involving the inexorable march of progress from a state of savagery to one of civilization. On the other hand, reason and science provided the means to facilitate this march through social engineering; human societies, like nature, could be mastered, reconstructed, and improved (p. 8).

In this way, modernity did not only mean all power to the people; it also created a sense of the all-powerful people. This is the backdrop against which the new ideals of nation and state developed. God was overthrown, and with him the natural order of things. It was now up to the People to discover the *real* order and then manipulate it.

### ***1.2 The Danger of Exclusion within the Nation-State: Genocide as a Modern Result***

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) tells us that there is a strong human tendency to define ourselves into groups. This tendency goes hand in hand with other social sentiments, such as in-group favouritism, out-group stereotyping, and inter-group hostility. In light of this, the structural link between democracy and nationalism only becomes truly dangerous when the definition of »citizen« becomes narrow and exclusive.

Most nations have to deal with ethnic minorities. The history, ideology, and resources of the nation determine who gets excluded and what is to be done with them. If the state has limited resources, favouritism can be one way of distinguishing between beneficiaries and outsiders. When this favouritism follows ethnic dividing lines, ethnicity is politicised. At this point, there are three strategies available to the leaderships in multi-ethnic societies. These are compromise-, gradualistic-, and radical solutions (Nodia, 1994). The first group of solutions could include power-sharing, where all the groups are welcomed into the decision-making process. The second strategy would entail assimilation, such as when members of an ethnic group are forced to relinquish their own cultural heritage and adopt the customs of the majority. Finally, the radical solutions contain various forms of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Belgium is an example of the first strategy, while Australia's treatment of the Aboriginals illustrates the second. In recent times, Rwanda is perhaps the most atrocious example of the radical solutions.

Democracies are certainly not immune to economic and ethnic iniquities. Indeed, democratic states are both exclusive and excluding – and often contradictory – in their treatment of resident individuals. For example, when the American soldiers landed in Europe towards the end of World War II, they were shocked by the intensity of anti-Semitism there, yet practised racial segregation at home in the US. Similarly, the French subscribed to the ideas of liberty and equality, while simultaneously establishing oppressive colonial regimes across the world (Todorov, 1996). This type of exclusion

– or »institutional closure« (Wimmer, 2002, p. 9) – usually occurs in nation-states. It is political, legal, military, and social, and it *shuts people out*. As we have seen, it was democracy, rather than authoritarianism, that gave rise to this new world-order where the »citizen« became the unit of social organisation. And as fledgling democracies scrambled to define the »citizen,« they simultaneously created the non-citizen. Imagining the nation necessarily entailed imagining the *Other*.

Herein lies the very seed of modern genocide. Earlier episodes of slaughter were usually linked to warfare and the desire to eliminate a territorial competitor or terrify a population into submission (Hinton, 2002). Later, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, modernity claimed its victims primarily in the name of imperialism, as indigenous peoples on the outskirts of Civilisation were slaughtered before its advance. But after the liberal revolutions, the modern intellectual project joined forces with the rise of the nation-state, and the socio-cultural dimensions of this endeavour would turn the state's destructive gaze inward to discover enemies within. Crucial distinctions were made between people, with class and race as the dominant denominations.

The truly important thing is not where the dividing lines were drawn, but that they *were* drawn. In the Soviet Union they followed class delineations; in Nazi Germany, the categorisations were biologically derived. Even though many cases of actual genocide seem to be based on ethnic and racial conflicts, the underlying issue is actually the modern state's emphasis on social coherence. The crucial development towards modern genocides thus took place when the targeted populations came to be seen as alien and in opposition to the state. Once a group is seen as such, it is exposed to the terrible force of the state, and it is mainly up to the national leadership how it wished to deal with its members (Levene, 2005).

Let me emphasise at this point that genocide is not a new phenomenon, nor is it necessarily modern. Rather, modern genocides are something more than their pre-modern ancestors, and it makes them into something else, psychologically different from the Roman destruction of Carthage, for example. What is fundamentally new about modern genocide is its scale and intent, which is the total annihilation of a perceived cultural/ethnic group. The local tribes have been replaced by the nation-states, and the inhabitants of defeated cities or territories have been exchanged for the Armenian, the Jew, and the Tutsi. Mass murder is no longer only an instrument of war or a consequence of imperialism, but also the final goal of the perpetrators. Historically, this murderous potential took shape in the first half of the nineteenth century, as the definition of citizenship transformed from a strictly territorial definition to a linguistic and ethnic one. In a lethal turn of events, the national citizenship replaced the universal human rights of the Enlight-

enment. The outbreak of World War I further entrenched this culturalisation and eventual racialisation of nationalist thought (Wimmer, 2002).<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Democracies' Role in the Genocidal Process: Critiquing a Political Power Structure that Allows Mass Murder**

A range of factors has been identified as precursors to genocide. These include difficult life conditions (Staub, 1989), ethnic stratification within a pluralistic society (Kuper, 1981), a prevailing culture of cruelty (Waller, 2002), political upheaval (Harff, 2003), state failure (Fein, 1999), and autocratic government (Harff, 2004). But the role of these societal factors needs to be re-examined, especially in regards to their perceived causal centrality in the genocidal process. As fundamental and essential precursors, they seem too simplistic – effects rather than origins – and neither causally *necessary* nor *sufficient* to the evolution of genocide.

The dangers inherent in nationalism have no doubt become terribly evident over the last couple of centuries. Simultaneously, the complicity of democracies in the genocidal processes around the world has been largely overlooked or trivialised. An obvious reason for this neglect owes to the central role played by authoritarian regimes in modern mass slaughter. Put simply, authoritarianism appears to be a precondition for genocide. But this view is superficial and only scratches the stormy surface of much deeper waters. Instead it is essential to realise that within the modern nation-state, the people actually relinquished the means of violence into the hands of the ruling elite (Bauman, 1989). This was true not only of totalitarian regimes, but was – and still is – fundamentally important to all democratic states as well. The modern state has a monopoly on violence.

As a consequence, the origin of recent genocides is partly to be found in the interplay between modernity and nationalism. Understood as a post-industrial, self-conscious political project (Vetlesen, 2000), modernity entailed powerful states aspiring towards constant improvement. This new worldview, with its emerging nationalism, exchanged a more Hobbesian model of society for an »international system« (Levene, 2004, p. 153), within which individual self-interest was replaced by national self-interest as the guiding principle for action.

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4 Curiously, this racial thinking – originating with the multicultural experiences of colonial empires – was a contemporary version of the pre-modern class system and its belief in hereditary privilege (Anderson, 1991). Now, within the modern nation-state, this primitive type of thinking was revitalised by modern science and fuelled by the Enlightenment's obsession with categorisation and generalisation, as well as with its ideals of constant improvement and progress. Within the highly organised state, it would only be a matter of time before these racial distinctions were employed in pursuit of the new nationalistic ideals.

Imperialism (and later, globalisation) then enabled this self-interest to extend beyond Western shores, allowing the increasingly industrialised nations' violent means to be employed against foreign peoples. Empires were born through both a military and cultural onslaught. Democracies are no exception. The democratic United States nearly annihilated the Native Americans in a genocidal campaign that would not end until the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. Such honourable men as Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt supported this extermination as a necessary and justifiable solution, providing Adolf Hitler with the convenient argument that the Nazis were only following in the footsteps of the Americans (Mann, 2005). Similarly, on their side of the Atlantic, the revolutionary French had previously massacred the *Vendéens* in the name of national unity. Instead of being a consequence of state failure, genocide results »from too much state power, from state-ism« (Stanton, 2004, p. 27).

Unfortunately, the state rarely perceives itself as a moral agent in international affairs (Staub, 2004), and bases most of its decisions on economic evaluations (Kuper, 1985). As a result, powerful nations regularly cause regional destabilisation while the perpetrators hide behind the veneer of »democracy.« For these reasons, it is also accurate to describe genocide as a synthesis between regional destabilisation and the industrialised powers' self-interest. As Todorov (1996, p. 168) wrote, »Auschwitz becomes possible when national interest is held above that of humanity.« And since regional destabilisation is frequently a goal of modern, Western states – while self-interest fuels their passivity in the face of mass killing, it is clear that the image of most modern democracies as innocent bystanders to genocide is untenable. Simultaneously, it becomes evident that terms like »evil« and »genocide« often serve as linguistic weapons in the arsenal of the politically empowered; only applicable beyond Western civilization and the clutches of self-incrimination.

### ***2.1 The UN's Continued Failure to Intervene in Genocides***

In the years since the outcry »Never again!«, at least fifty-five genocides and politicides have occurred around the world (Stanton, 2004). Until recently, people were dying *en masse* in Sudan, as the result of what the US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, called »genocide« in his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in September, 2004 (Slavin, 2004). At that time, the Sudanese government – using its air force, Arab militias, and organised starvation – was systematically killing the black population of the Darfur region. In conservative numbers, this meant that at least 30.000 individuals had been killed so far, and that 1.5 million people were on the run from the violence. The US administration consequently decided to call the situation in Sudan genocide, and went on to accuse four Security Council members (China, Russia, Algeria, and Pakistan) of valuing business with Sudan over humanitarian concerns (Oliver, 2004).



Under the *UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, the signatory states (including the US) are required to deploy an armed force in order to bring an immediate halt to the alleged genocide. But just like previous administrations had done, the United States government shied away from an unfolding, distant catastrophe that could potentially become another black hole of American deaths. However, Sudan *did* receive increased attention from the world community. Two months after Powell labelled the atrocities genocide, UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, urged the Security Council to issue a warning. As a result of this international pressure, a fragile peace agreement has now come in place, and on June 6, 2005, the International Criminal Court proclaimed that it will investigate government officials in Sudan in relation to the brutal events that occurred in Darfur (Vasagar, 2005).

I recount this (temporary?) »success story« of the new millennium because it is a promising one: the perpetrating government responded positively to diplomatic pressure, and a possible genocide was stopped. This shows that – contrary to prevalent misconceptions – genocide *can* be efficiently halted, also without enormous military losses.

But sadly, this »success story« represents little more than the exception to the rule; a curious anecdote in the history of failed genocide prevention. Considering the actual track record of the international community's determination to forcefully prevent genocide, a more sinister question certainly lingers in the background: for what would have happened if the Sudanese government had given no heed to the international warnings, and instead intensified its genocidal campaign? Would the UN have intervened? Would it have sent troops to engage the regime in combat? Would the US have done so? Maybe. But unfortunately, based on previous experience, the answer is *probably not*.

The international community has a bleak record indeed when it comes to restraining or preventing genocide through forceful military action (Kuper, 1985). Again and again, the world – with the US government and the UN in the lead – has been an inactive witness to human slaughter. In Turkey, in Nazi-occupied Europe, in Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, the world did little or nothing to stop, or even condemn, the annihilation of innocent civilians (Power, 2002). The reasons behind this inaction are related to politics – with its ideologies, diplomatic intrigues, and opinion polls – and to the present organisational systems, with their economical limitations and politically retrained power structures.

There is often a wide gap between popular views and political attitudes in regards to the prevention of genocide. Sixty-five percent of Americans (polled in 1994) believed that the United Nations should always, or in most cases, intervene with the necessary force in order to stop acts of genocide, whereas eighty percent would favour intervention in Bosnia and Rwanda, if the UN determined that genocide was being perpetrated there. The prospect

of some American deaths did not deter this determination (Fein, 1999, p. 62).

It is a long way from this idealistic stand to the reality of international politics. For in truth, human suffering rarely mobilises policy makers (Harff, 2003), who are more concerned about economics, domestic popularity, and the lives of their own citizens than with the thousands of victims in a far-away region of the world (Fein, 1999). The leader of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda, Major-General Romeo Dallaire, put it this way: »[w]e actually expected around 50,000 plus dead. Can you imagine having that expectation in Europe? Racism slips in so it changes our expectations« (Power, 2002, p. 350). Ignorance, self-interest, prejudice, remoteness, and even racism interact in the creation of a fundamental indifference in the Western governments. On top of this, there is a natural fear of making mistakes. The democratic leaders are afraid of their electorate: how will they be judged? Will certain »humanitarian« decisions destroy any chances of re-election? Here we see it very clearly, how democratic mechanisms contribute to genocide. The majority opinion in the population – real or imagined – guides the government in its moral choices.

But such an initial sense of indifference is only the beginning of the problems presently surrounding genocide prevention. Aggravating the situation is the fact that the only organisation with a formal mandate to prevent genocide today is the UN: a hotchpotch of national interests and diplomatic tug-of-wars. Some of the UN's fundamental shortcomings are related to its insufficient funds. Indeed, the UN's total budget is only fifteen billion dollars per year, amounting to less than two percent of the world's annual investment of eight hundred billion dollars in its military (Øberg, 2004). As a result, UN departments lack the adequate resources necessary in order to implement long-term anti-genocide strategies. What is more, the Department of Political Affairs (which is supposed to deal with mass murder scenarios) even lacks personnel who are experts in genocide prevention (Stanton, 2004).

Insufficient funds aside, the UN is structurally organised in a way that gives free reign to the political motives and diplomatic struggles mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. This flaw permeates the whole system, all the way into the heart of the decision making process: the Security Council. Just consider the fact that the five permanent members on the Council (the United States, Britain, France, China, and Russia) control as much as eighty-six percent of the global weapons trade (Øberg, 2004). There can be no neutrality under such conditions.

What is more, each of these members has the power to veto any proposed course of action. This, of course, means that countries such as China or Russia must agree with the Western powers before anything is decided. Not an impossible situation, but not a very productive one either, especially in regards to international intervention. This was clearly seen in the case of Cam-

bodia, when Britain wanted to launch an investigation into the situation, and Russia, Yugoslavia, and Syria responded by blocking any such action (Power, 2002). The result of this dynamic was not only a lack of forceful intervention: indeed, after three full years of mass slaughter in Cambodia, the UN had not even issued an official condemnation of the regime!

Finally, it can be costly to oppose the system and fight for change. The inventor of the term »genocide,« Raphael Lemkin, died of a heart attack after having struggled for decades to get the Genocide Convention ratified. Isolated by the establishment, only seven people attended the funeral of this exceptional man. Other people who spoke out and demanded action risked their careers. For instance, when the appropriately named Archer Blood, US consul general in Dacca, stated that genocide was taking place in eastern Pakistan in the early 1970s and expressed dissent in regards to the American inaction towards the Pakistani assault on the Bengalis, he was recalled from his post.

Later, in relation to the slaughter of the Hutu in Burundi, a State Department official responded to a junior official's appeal for action by asking, »Do you know of any official whose career has been advanced because he spoke out for human rights?« (Power, 2002, p. 83). Since the decision makers are also simultaneously the highest »employers« of the organisation, any insubordinate grass root initiatives can be eliminated, thus maintaining a status quo that has proven thoroughly inefficient at preventing genocide.

Thus paralysed, the danger inherent in the UN's responsibility is exactly its inability to fulfil this mandate; for at present, the UN is both ideologically and systemically restrained from the kind of action and flexibility that is necessary in order to efficiently prevent genocides.

## ***2.2 Ideological Restraint: The Principle of State Sovereignty***

The UN's fight against genocide was ideologically restrained from the very beginning. Keep in mind, for instance, that political mass murder was kept out of the formal definition of genocide because of Soviet pressure (problematic, since all mass murder is »political« in some sense). And when it comes to the crucial matter of prevention itself, this enjoys only two perfunctory remarks in the Convention (Kuper, 1985).

The UN is mainly dedicated to the maintenance of international peace and security, based on protecting the territorial integrity, political independence, and national sovereignty of its member states. This traditionally provided order, stability, and predictability in international relations. But today, as most armed conflicts are internal rather than international, and almost all genocides are domestic, genocide seems to be beyond UN jurisdiction, as that organisation was initially conceived. It is therefore legitimate to question whether the human costs of the international stability have become too high, and subsequently whether the prevailing political belief system is indeed morally defensible.

If the UN is to extricate itself from this quagmire of lethal bystanding, the organisation has to face its modern challenge of reconciling outdated founding principles with the present geopolitical situation. But this reformist objective faces numerous political obstacles. Significantly, the influential economic-oriented thinking stands in the way. This is then coupled with the fact that states usually distinguish between national and international interests (where the former hold precedence). When an intervention is neither economically profitable nor in the interest of the nation (as that is narrowly defined), preventive intervention will typically be deemed *impractical*.

Furthermore, the UN consists of numerous states that worry about future accusations of genocide being directed against themselves (e.g., China in Tibet and Russia in Chechnya), as well as states that maintain important trading connections with the present perpetrators (cf. Powell's accusation, mentioned earlier). Both of these groups will have little interest in any form of intervention; they will argue against it, and veto any military operation when given the chance.

In the frequent attempts to side-step their preventive obligation inherent in any declaration of genocide, hesitant or disinterested member states will often choose to obscure the problem by framing the situation in less dramatic language, characterising genocides as »humanitarian crises« or »civil wars« (Fein, 1999, p. 42). This kind of »strategic denial« (Lemarchand, 2003, p. 144) was dramatically displayed by US policies during the Rwandan and Bosnian genocides, when any mention of the so-called »g-word« (Power, 2002, p. 358) was systematically erased from the official descriptions of the slaughter. Such linguistic manoeuvres muddle the perception of the causal relationships and obfuscate the identities of the perpetrators. The result is that the crime goes unacknowledged, and consequently that no intervention is legally required.

### **2.3 The Danger of Empty Threats**

A double standard resides within the UN. This is evident in the way the delegates agree on abstract moral standards, but refuse to outline any concrete measures for implementation of those standards *on the ground*. In this way, a plethora of declarations and conventions emanate from the organisation, lacking any practical substance. A moral precedent is set, but not enforced. On the other hand, this double standard is also evident in many of the interventions that *are* made. Obviously, the involved states often have ulterior motives for interfering in the other state's internal affairs (the inconsistent justifications made by the American and British leaderships in order to invade Iraq come to mind). But when the line is not clearly drawn between genuine humanitarian interventions and politically motivated military campaigns, the latter can significantly hinder the former. This was certainly true in relation to the Cambodian experience in the seventies. In that case, the Americans had just suffered a terrible defeat in Vietnam, and as the

US-backed regime of Lon Nol fell to the Khmer Rouge (KR), the American political establishment never seriously considered implicating itself in another Southeast Asian campaign. What is more, in the wake of Watergate and the Vietnam disaster, the Nixon and Ford administrations had lost all credibility. Since they were also intricately linked to the fallen Cambodian regime, Ford's citations of intelligence reports, arguing that a bloodbath was unfolding under the KR, seemed to the American public and the political opposition to be nothing more than a new strategy in the fight against Communism (Power, 2002).

This illustrates one of the terrible dangers of political credibility-loss. Within democracies, credibility becomes a crucial element of power. If you have it, you can do almost anything; without it, you are finished as a leader. For all practical purposes, the preceding ideological conflict (in Vietnam) stood in the way of a morally and humanly important intervention (in Cambodia). As this fact combined with the US's failure to ratify the Genocide Convention – and with the exclusion of political groups in that document – the decision was all but predetermined: that is, to abandon the Cambodian people to its own fate behind the closed borders of »Democratic Kampuchea.« Within the next three years, approximately two million people would be killed.

The double standard inevitably creates an »impression of hypocrisy« (Kuper, 1985, p. 89) in the international community, and it certainly represents a grave disservice to the project of genocide prevention. A very harmful consequence of this inconsistency in intervention policy has been characterised as »negative spillover effects« (Kuperman, 2003, p. 72), where the Western rhetoric appears to be believed by the oppressed groups and simultaneously discounted by the aggressors. In other words, previous military interventions have created an illusory humanitarian precedent. This gives false hope to suppressed minority groups and causes them to rise up where they would otherwise have remained silent, while signalling indirectly to the elites that they may launch a genocidal campaign without suffering international repercussions (Harff, 2003). In this way, empty threats from the international community may provoke the opposite effects of those intended and ultimately incite internal hostilities.

A dynamic similar to this was observed in the Balkan conflict. While the West proclaimed that it stood behind an independent Bosnia, Milosevic was well-briefed, and knew that this commitment was more rhetorical than militarily real (Power, 2002). Tragically, the declarations of the international community were once again believed – this time by the Bosnian Muslims, as they fled to the »safe area« of Srebrenica, where the UN guaranteed protection against the Serb perpetrators. But when the pressure was on and the Serb forces attacked Srebrenica, the organisation folded and the promised protection evaporated. No air support was granted and the few UN soldiers on the ground put down their weapons in order to avoid a fight in which they

would be significantly outnumbered. Instead of saving the Muslims, the UN had in effect created a concentration centre on behalf of the Serbs. Over the next few days, the worst massacre in Europe since World War II took place in and around Srebrenica, claiming the lives of at least 7.000 Muslim men and boys.

### **3. Free to Act: A Brief Outline of the Psychology of Genocide**

The reasons why a state resorts to genocide are many and vary from case to case, depending on historical contexts. One important reason would be that the perpetrators believe the targeted group(s) to be an obstacle to their vision of a better society. Inherent in this belief is a sense that the present situation is untenable, or at least highly undesirable. The Nazis told the economically ruined Germans that the Jews were their misfortune, barring the way to a strong and proud Germany. In Rwanda, the killers were told that the Tutsi would forever plot the downfall of the Hutu, thus threatening the nation from within. This is exactly the kind of paranoid sentiment that drives the genocidal process towards its extreme solution. Finally, this ideological fanaticism, together with pragmatic political decisions, bring the architects of genocide to a point where the »logical« next step is mass murder. Individual members of the targeted group may seem innocent and benign, but that is only on the surface. They are by their very nature dangerous and unalterable, and if they are not somehow removed from our midst, they will one day undermine us or totally destroy us. The killers therefore murder in order to save their civilisation from downfall. Or they kill in order to realise some imagined potential that can only flourish when the enemy within has been uprooted. As Himmler said, »It is the curse of greatness that it must step over dead bodies to create new life« (Mann, 2005, p. ix). The hellish scenes in Auschwitz are thus perceived to be necessary as steps on the way to the utopian Third Reich.

As they unfold, genocides typically follow a fairly stable pattern of increasing discrimination and violence towards the out-group(s), beginning with stigmatisation and symbolisation, before progressing through dehumanisation, isolation, and annihilation (cf. Stanton, 1998). Through stigmatisation, the victimised group is defined as an unalterable category of beings. Their qualities are then described in very negative symbolic terms: the Jews were »infectious,« »vermin« and »lice,« whereas the Tutsi were »cockroaches« and »traitors.« Massive propaganda campaigns expound the targeted group's harmful nature; it is a »problem« that needs to be solved.

The first solution is to remove them from society. The Nazis placed the Jews in ghettos and concentration camps, and the Khmer Rouge also had terrible prisons and work camps. The Soviet Union contained a veritable country of camps, with around 100.000.000 people passing through them

during their existence. If the ideologues are extreme enough, the final step is to kill all these unwanted »elements.«

The development towards genocide entails numerous psychological processes. Initially, it is hard to kill another human being. Members of the German killing squads in the East, for example, often vomited, cried, or ran away from their first massacres (Browning, 1992). Even the infamous Himmler and his subordinate, Adolf Eichmann, felt nauseous and uneasy, as they stood face-to-face with atrocity. Far from being a fulfilment of some animalistic instinct in us, mass murder takes the form of a cognitive conversion process in most perpetrators. The personality-oriented models (e.g., Adorno *et al.*, 1950; Lifton, 1986) have failed to explain this process in a satisfactory manner, and genocidal behaviour is thus presently understood in terms of social human tendencies.

Recent explanations focus on the *behavioural tendencies* – towards compliance (Freedman and Fraser, 1966), conformity (Asch, 1951), and obedience (Milgram, 1974) – as well as on the *social cognitive tendencies* conducive to genocide, such as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), diffusion of responsibility (Darley and Latane, 1968), dehumanisation (Bandura *et al.*, 1975), just-world thinking (Lerner, 1980), in-group bias (Tajfel, 1981), deindividuation (Zimbardo, 2004), and ultimately moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). Together – or apart – these psychological processes enable the individual to change his mental framework to such a degree that mass murder seems not only justifiable, but also morally good or even required.

Socio-political elites manipulate these psychological tendencies in order to achieve their exterminatory objectives. For genocide is not the natural end product of a specific historical process (as argued by Goldhagen, 1996). It is instead a psycho-political process, heavily dependent upon the regime's success at placing the victims beyond the moral reach of the perpetrators. The lack of interference by other nations aids this psychological process by allowing it to unfold, unquestioned, unhindered, and unpunished. Despite all their humanistic aspirations, democracies have thus become accomplices in the horrors of genocide.

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