

Toward a vocabulary of massacre and genocide

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Has the trauma of September 11th made us forget all the tragedies that preceded it? Has it made us forget the war in the former Yugoslavia that, this time 10 years ago, was at its height in Bosnia? Or the genocide in Rwanda, in which Samantha Power shows in her excellent book that the United States did all it could at the time to block an international intervention?¹ Have we also forgotten the tens of thousands of deaths in Algeria, Timor, Colombia, Sierra Leone or Chechnya? The places in which violence has piled fury upon fury are too many to name. Have these conflicts disappeared from our intellectual horizon because we have now limited ourselves to considering the world uniquely on the basis of the categories of terrorism and the just war?

Against this dominant tendency, this article attempts to renew reflection on some of these contemporary conflicts by focusing the analysis on the processes of extreme violence that characterize them and whose most spectacular and enigmatic manifestation is that of *massacre*. There are at least three reasons why this appears to be in need of analysis. The first is based on the very definition of massacre, as a form of action that is most often collective and aimed at destroying those who are not fighters but rather civilians, men, women, children and unarmed soldiers. Therefore, the question returns perpetually: why kill individuals perceived to be innocent or unable to defend themselves? The second regards the fact that the victims, far from being unknown to their torturers, often belong to the same community or village. This sudden descent into massacre between individuals that may have enjoyed good neighbourly relations for a period of years is stupefying. Massacre, understood here as a practice of proximity between executioner and victim, is often accompanied by atrocities that defy comprehension. Such acts are staggering to the “average” imagination.

It would be impossible to suggest definitive analyses of these phenomena. Nevertheless, this text has the ambition of attempting to demonstrate the usefulness of a comparative reflection on massacre. Its aim is to go beyond case studies, or rather the presentation of the best of such studies, in order to better understand the processes that lead to the act of massacre. To this end, the analysis runs along two main lines. An historical grounding: it would in effect be difficult to attempt to understand the massacres of the 1990s without taking into account the history of massacre in the twentieth century, including those known as genocides.² Trans-disciplinary openness: the phenomenon of massacre is in itself so complex that it calls for the contributions of several disciplines,

particularly sociology, anthropology and psychology. What follows attests to this.

In sum, the aim of this study is to show how the social sciences may contribute to developing a comparative reflection on this subject, which could be thought of as a vocabulary of massacre and genocide.

Crisis of the state and the international context

The practice of massacre has above all been perpetrated by state power. The American political scientist Rudolph Rummel estimates that 169 million people have been killed by their own governments during the twentieth century, many more than the 34 million deaths during all the wars of the same period.³ A first paradoxical question is triggered by the following observation: is massacre committed by strong or weak states? The theory of the strong state appears obvious as it is necessary to have raw strength in order to commit massacre and, even more so, genocide: the strength to destroy, to organize and to misinform. Genocide itself presupposes the power of a state with an armed force at its disposal, but also, as has been stressed by several authors,⁴ a significant bureaucracy and a propaganda machine. This is also the point of view taken by Rummel: “absolute power kills absolutely,” he states.

However, this theory of the strong state is challenged by those who draw attention to the *general context* in which these powers are situated. They remark that the latter, albeit powerful, find themselves in a position of vulnerability that precisely explains their engagement in massacre. Taking into account the *context of war* is essential in this regard, although it should be nuanced. In this way, historians such as Philippe Burrin or Christian Gerlach have suggested that the decision on the “Final Solution,” apparently made by the Nazis following December 1941, cannot be separated from the fact that at this point the latter realized the war against the Soviet Union could not be won. It is therefore in light of the failure to come, reinforced by the entry into the war of the United States following the bombing of Pearl Harbour (December 7, 1941), that Hitler made the decision to at least succeed with his other fundamental objective: the extermination of the Jews. In Rwanda, where the context is obviously different, the question of the relationship between war and genocide is equally central. The security of the Hutu government in power in Kigali was threatened from outside, having been attacked since 1990 by the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Numerous authors also connect this external Tutsi threat to the ideological construction, made by Hutu extremists, of a Tutsi threat coming from inside, taking over from the former in order to undermine the very foundations of state power. As a consequence, not losing the war consisted at least in the total destruction of this internal threat, in other words, the extermination of the Tutsis. A rather similar reasoning may be applied to the Armenian genocide during which the massacres followed the severe defeat of the Turks by the Russians in a context of war in which the Armenian minority in the Ottoman Empire was perceived by the “Young Turks” government as an accomplice and ally of Russia.

This approach therefore reinforces the thesis proposed by those who contend massacres are the products of weak states, of those which appear vulnerable or which believe they cannot win at war without going as far as the destruction of civilian populations. There are several cases in point here. In the first place, that of a political power whose legitimacy is not ensured and/or is strongly contested. For example, according to the French historian Jean-Clément Martin, it is impossible to understand the massacres of the French Revolution (beginning with those of the Vendée) without understanding that they are the paradoxical expression of the state's weakness. Similarly, the extreme violence of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia could be explained by the fact that they perceived themselves as being an extreme minority. Therefore, a state or non-state power resorts to massacre in order to overcome its position of weakness, to ensure influence over the people and to extend its own power. If states make wars as much as wars make states, as Charles Tilly put it, the same could be said of massacre. Another case in point is that of a state already in place whose legitimacy is strongly contested, individuals being re-appropriated or themselves re-appropriating the right to violence, refusing to accept or no longer accepting allegiance to this power. The situation of Algeria, following the refusal of the state to recognize the results of the 1991 elections, leading the country into civil war, demonstrates such a development.

A third case is that of the collapse of a system of domination or federation, previously accepted by its members. The context of the dismantling of empire renders the appearance of this type of violence most probable by allowing for the reconstruction of strong identities along nationalist or communitarian lines. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century and the repercussions of the fall of the Soviet Empire in the Balkans following 1989 are relevant examples.

The difficulty of analysing the practices of massacre without respect to the international context becomes clear. The difficulty is in considering the event within its "local" setting, while simultaneously capturing it in its international dimension. Here too approaches may differ, adopting either a more structural point of view or a more functional one. In his work on massacres, and more generally on genocide, the English historian Mark Levene identifies rather with the first point of view. He attempts to show that the destruction of civilian populations should not be thought of as an "aberration" of the trajectory of the nation-state, but rather as a "byproduct" of the international system and the global economy. He refers in particular to the thinking of Anthony Giddens who analyses the state in a systemic relationship with other nation-states. "Genocide" may occur when certain states in the quest of rapid "modernization" target populations that they perceive as threatening or as an obstacle to their will to power.⁵ The American political scientist Manu Midlarsky proposes a more functional analysis based on his comparative study of three genocides: the Armenian, the Jewish and the Rwandan. In his view, large-scale massacres cannot occur without genocidal states benefiting from the assistance, or at least the passiveness, of other states (in this instance, imperial Germany for Turkey,

the Vatican for the Third Reich and France for Rwanda). It is precisely this lack of intervention by a third party (in this case at the international level) that leaves the way free for genocidal operators.⁶ This same line of interpretation is also useful for understanding the dynamics of the practices of ethnic cleansing during the war in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. In this regard, the Srebrenica massacre (July 13–15, 1995) remains the most tragic example of the passiveness of the international community during this war.

However, this convergence between domestic and international factors cannot alone explain the social process that leads to the act of massacre. The impact of war should notably be contextualized as large-scale massacres have been perpetrated outside of the state of a declared war, as Paul Bartop recently explored.⁷ Consider, for example, the great famine of 1932–1933 unleashed by Stalin against the Ukrainian “Kulaks.” In this case, the mentality of “total war” of the Soviet powers against an “absolute enemy” (the Kulaks) was at the core of the process of destruction. In a favourable, but not determinative, international context, should one then consider that the ideology of the perpetrator is the primary “cause” which triggers the extreme violence of massacres?

Ideologies, myths and representations of the enemy

There is no doubt that, in situations of serious crisis, the ideological discourse propagated by the power in place (or by groups seeking this power) proposes a “reading” of the situation, designates the “threats” and calls for a collective mobilization towards their destruction. In his comparative study of the cases of Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda, René Lemarchand points out the importance of the ideological factor that may be known as either Marxist–Leninism, nationalism or a perverted vision of democracy.⁸ But he also underlines the fact that these ideologies rarely have a profound impact on the masses, especially when they have foreign origins; unless their language can be radically transformed and adapted to the local culture. It is therefore the reinterpretation, or even the fabrication, of myths about the history of the country that allows for the ideological “transplanting” into local culture. It is for this reason that the study of tales, rumours and memories belonging to a culture, as is proposed by Beatrice Pouligny, is important for comprehending the massacres that have been committed within them.⁹ The anthropological approach proposed by Alexander Hinton develops along the same lines.¹⁰ It is in fact this plunge into the imaginary that gives historical and emotional resonance to the ideological discourse.

Furthermore, as is demonstrated by political sociology, an *identitarian process* is constructed in and of itself. The identity narrative, as is emphasized by Denis-Constant Martin, allows “in ‘modern’ situations of disturbance and rapid change, material as well as moral, for anxiety to be verbalised and, at the same time, to be attenuated by re-injecting meaning, thanks to familiar references—historical, territorial, cultural or religious—into that which seems no longer to have any.”¹¹ It is probably this “identitarian proclamation that, when it is

increasingly radicalised, is synonymous with the very logic of massacre. It results in an antagonistic polarisation between ‘us’ against a ‘them’, the affirmation of ‘us’ implying the destruction of ‘them’.” In sum, it is in the name of a vision of a collective self to be constructed or defended that massacre is perpetrated, on the basis of resentment, fear or revenge.

This identity construction therefore produces two ways of speaking of “us” and of the “enemy.” The discourse on the self is often one of *purity*, a theme that can be developed by a racist or nationalist ideology as well as by a political doctrine (such as Marxist–Leninism), or by a religious one. This discourse of purity is obviously elaborated by means of a rhetoric of impurity or dirtiness. The collective self is spoken of like a “sameness,” an eternal “sameness” that must be re-found (to return to the myth).

This affirmation of “sameness” may be a reaction to modernity and to the changes being proposed as a framework for withdrawal and collective security: “We are among ourselves,” against an “other,” an “un-same.” If the identitarian process leads to massacre, this moment is in itself a tool for reinforcing this identity construction. The destruction of the “them” would be the constitutive “proof” of the “we.” So to kill is not only to purify, it is also to be purified. From this stems the language of purification or of cleansing that borrows from religion (ritual purification), from war (clearing the ground), or from medicine (eliminating the germs).

Secondly, the discourse of the other to be destroyed feeds upon a rhetoric of the threat that he represents. Whether this threat is fictional (as in the case of the Jews against the Nazis) or real (the Tutsi RPF attack), the other to be destroyed must create fear because it is this feeling of fear that legitimates his destruction. It is for this reason that the theme of conspiracy is often perceived, conspiracy plotted by the dangerous “them,” of whom “we” develop a paranoid representation. It can easily be found, although not exclusively, in the vision of the “absolute” enemy of totalitarian systems. Such a process is above all imaginary: “as they want to kill us, we must kill them first, as quickly as possible.” Everything happens as if it were an urgent problem of security. He who prepares to become the assassin presents himself as the victim. The enterprise of destruction appears to be an operation of prevention and of group survival.

This rhetoric of threat and conspiracy is added to by that of the dehumanization of the “enemy” or rather by his “bestialization.” Whether it be in Africa, Asia or Europe, victims are described as “germs,” as “harmful pests,” as “rats” or “cattle.” But to what extent is this zoological representation (that is also found on military battle grounds) a “preparation” for the act of massacring one’s fellow human? Or rather is it a rationalization elaborated *in situ* or *a posteriori* by the executioner who becomes convinced that his victims are animals? There is a lack of empirical studies of the vocabulary of executioners before and during massacres.

Whoever they may be, two fundamental figures of the enemy should be distinguished. The first is the figure of the *suspect*, of a two-faced other: he calls himself a “revolutionary” but in fact is a “bourgeois.” He says he is for the state,

but in fact belongs to the guerrillas. In sum, he has a secret and a dangerous side which masks his immediate appearance. As Pol Pot stated in the war against the Communist Vietnamese: "It is necessary to eliminate the Vietnamese spirits within the Khmer corps." The second figure is that of an *other in excess*, fundamentally "foreign": he does not have the same "blood," the same mores as "us," etc. Furthermore, this "excess" of the other is qualitative as well as quantitative: it exists in too large numbers and has a tendency to multiply and to proliferate. These two figures of the enemy, that may overlap in a single historical situation, lead to different dynamics of destruction. The first (the figure of the suspect) aims principally at the political subordination of the group; the second (the figure of the *other in excess*) aims at its identitarian eradication.

All of the above leads us to state that massacre, before being this atrocious physical act, proceeds first from a *mental process*, from a vision of the other to be eliminated. But how may we evaluate the praxological power of this imaginary of destruction? In economics or sociology it is thought that the nature of representation exists in its being created on the basis of the real. This, in particular, refers to what is known as "self-fulfilling prophecies," to follow the sociologist Robert Merton. Should one therefore consider that this political fantasy of destruction of an "other," crystallized in public discourse, is sufficient for precipitating massacre?

Public discourse, decision and the organization of massacre

The problem of the *intention* to destroy is found in the very process leading to the action. In order to qualify the crime, a judge seeks always to prove the criminal intention. Did the murderer have the idea of murdering? Was it premeditated? The notion of *intentionality* is also at the heart of the Convention on the Prevention and Repression of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the UN in 1948.¹² But its usage is problematic in the social sciences. It is certainly possible to speak of a person's intention to describe his/her disposition with regard to a particular act, at a given moment. However, applying the same approach to qualifying the functioning of a structure of power is inappropriate.¹³ This leads to "psychologizing" its functioning when it would always be better to analyse a policy and to describe the organizational means put into force to attain it.

Moreover, this notion of "intention" presupposes a simplistic vision of the descent into massacre. It appears in fact to propose a sequence of thought to action that goes from the project of destroying a collective to its concrete fulfilment; as if it consists in formulating an idea, hatching a plan along these lines and putting it into practice. But such an approach immediately eliminates the fundamental enigma posed by large-scale massacre; that of its actual realization, summed up well by Claude Lanzmann with regards to the Shoah: "Between the will to kill and the act itself there is an abyss."¹⁴ Approaching the establishment of processes for the destruction of civilians through the prism of "intention" leads thus to the risk of neglecting the complexity of the develop-

ment of such phenomena. And yet, it is possible to object: there are people who decide upon massacres, who give orders and others who carry them out ... How, therefore, may we further reflect on this essential point?

In my view, the notion of *intention* poses three types of problems relative to public discourse on the enemy, to the decision to massacre and to its concrete organization.

The analysis of the public discourse is related to the previous point regarding the construction of images of the enemy. When the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic declared, in October 1991, to the Bosnian parliament, that if the Muslims opted for independence they ran the risk of disappearing, he was clearly evoking a project of ethnic cleansing, if not genocide. But this does not at all mean that the project was ready to be put into place at that exact moment. The same could be said of the famous speech made by Hitler at the Reichstag on January 30, 1939, during which he prophesied “the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.” To deduce that the “Final Solution” was already decided, if not programmed, would be a gross error of historical interpretation. It is rather as a function of the development of a particularly complex situation, in the context of a total war, that Saul Friedlander states that the “general ideological objectives and the tactical decisions were mutually reinforced, favoring increasingly radical initiatives.”¹⁵ At the precise moment that they are expressed such declarations cannot, therefore, be understood literally. The intention that they formulate publicly has not yet been tangibly translated into fact.

But the extreme violence that they express against a publicly identified enemy certainly does not make of these trivial declarations. Such public speeches, made by political leaders (in the German case it was the head of state himself), are a way of legitimating in advance the unleashing of an increasingly radical physical violence against this “enemy.” In other words, the appearance of an openly violent discourse “sets the tone” precisely because it is public and “free of complexes.” It creates *de facto* a climate of impunity and, as a consequence, an incitement to murder. The public discourse of hatred does not, moreover, come only from political leaders but also from various intellectuals or writers, journalists and religious leaders whose writings and declarations explain, justify and legitimize the reasons for this violence. The public declarations provide those who shall be involved in the massacres, in advance, with frameworks of interpretation and legitimization of their actions. The role of the media is of particular importance here, as has been shown in various studies on Rwanda or the former Yugoslavia. However, it is possible to overemphasize the role of hate propaganda because there is nothing to prove that this, on its own, leads to the unleashing of massacre. Nevertheless, propaganda certainly contributes to the creation of a sort of *semantic matrix* that gives meaning to the increased force of a dynamic of violence that then works as a “launching pad” for massacre.

Yet all this does not teach us anything about the moment of the decision. When is the decision made and by whom? Analysing the discourse and writings of protagonists leading to massacre is certainly insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of this complex process. One must also identify the variety of

decisions to act as critical moments in the processes leading to acts of massacre. Therefore, studying the decision-making process in this way is another means of exploring the question of intention, on an *historical basis*. This approach has proved fruitful with regard to the Holocaust, although recent German studies demonstrate the complexity of the decision-making process as well as the recent books by the historians Christopher Browning and Mark Roseman.¹⁶ However, in many cases the existence of documents that would allow for an unambiguous dating and authentication of the decision to take action is rare, if not non-existent. And for good reason: those responsible never want to leave traces of their actions. As a result, many debates ensue as to the “real” intentions of the decision-makers, on the presumed date of the decision and, clearly, on the *a posteriori* refutation of the reality of the events. The Armenian massacres of 1915–1916 are a case in point.¹⁷

That which attests best to the will of those who decide to massacre is its *practical organization*, that is, the establishment of the means and the personnel for achieving the physical elimination of one or another category of a given population. The importance of a methodology of historical research, which has already been put to use in several case studies, becomes evident in this regard: describing the how in order to understand the why, a procedure advocated by Claudine Vidal for researchers investigating the genocide in Rwanda, is the only pragmatic means of avoiding ideological presuppositions.

However, studying the organization of massacre does not mean that all its aspects were foreseen. Certain authors have the tendency to lead one to believe that everything was calculated and premeditated by the perpetrators. This is an image inspired once again by the legalistic approach of proving that the massacre was the outcome of a concerted and coordinated strategy. Although the dynamic of the process of destruction is set in motion by a central stimulus (coming from those who decide on its organization), it also follows a certain improvisation of action. It is known for example that the first Nazi extermination programme against the mentally ill in Germany was accompanied by egregious error and clumsiness. As in the case of other forms of human collective action, the organized processes of civilian destruction may undergo various hazards, variations, periods of respite or sudden accelerations.

A construction from above and from below

Yet does this approach to the processes of destruction as a voluntary trajectory, moving from decision to organization and then to implementation, not lead to a contortion of one’s understanding? Indeed, it appears as if there was a pre-ordained top–down hierarchical schema set in place for understanding the process. However, this mechanical, functional approach does not assist at all in understanding the enigma of the *social participation* in massacre. Seeing it *uniquely* as an ordered action does not allow for an exploration of the question of a certain social complicity, if not the collective identification, which characterizes it. It may be useful to develop an altogether different approach by studying massacre

“from the bottom” of society. Independently of the power of a state, with its means of large-scale killing, this may be one of the most fruitful ways of taking stock of the massive nature of certain massacres.

This question could already be treated by the study of public opinion. It is necessary to make allowances for the difference between the deployment of a propaganda machine aimed at the demonization of a given enemy and the actual commitment of the public to such an ideological rhetoric. The study of public opinion makes it possible to generate an idea of the population’s frame of mind, starting from the degree to which it is receptive to such propaganda. Since the 1950s, studies of Nazi Germany have shown that genocide could not have taken place there without a sort of tacit consent to the Jewish persecution. The Nazis interpreted the lack of reaction among Germans as a possibility to cross an additional threshold in their persecution of the Jews. This hypothesis has been confirmed by further studies, although more specific historical research has made it possible for it to be fine-tuned.¹⁸ In other words, the role of a third party, which is of so much importance between persecutor and victim, is no longer the “international community” (see above), but what shall be called “public opinion.” Therefore, when this third party not only remains passive, but commits itself implicitly, or even openly, to the process of violence then the descent into massacre increases in probability. This deficiency can only be compensated for by the external intervention of an “international” public opinion that, mainly by means of pressure from various NGOs, attempts to denounce it and to assist and support the victims. The third party that participates in the development of the process of destruction can, most practically, be a neighbour, leading therefore to thinking about the notion of “social ties.” This approach completely overturns the previous perspective. Instead of considering massacre as leading to the destruction of the social ties between the victims and their immediate environment, it proposes the opposite hypothesis: that the action of massacre is rather a consequence of the prior dislocation of these social ties with regards to those who shall become the victims.

It is no longer sufficient, therefore, only to take into account the crisis of the state (problem no 1), but rather, more profoundly, the “crisis of society” itself, by means of the study of social and community relations. In this way, it may be possible to explain that massacres, far from always being ordered “from above” can as well emerge from the initiative of local actors. The case of the massacres of Jews carried out by Poles themselves, such as that of the village of Jedwabne studied by Jan Gross,¹⁹ or those of the Hutus against their Tutsi neighbours (or members of their own families), begs to be analysed from this perspective. For the case of Bosnia, Xavier Bougarel has shown how, in the context of the collapse of the federal Yugoslav state, Bosnian society was confronted by the problem of redefining citizenship; which had the notable effect of putting the rules of good neighbourly relations between communities, codified in the *Comsiliuk*, inherited from the Ottoman Empire, into question. In his view, the conditions were ripe for the descent into “intimate crime”: the rape of women and the destruction of houses and of their inhabitants.²⁰ However, it remains true

to say that the context of war that, in the practice of massacre, “crystallizes” this potential violence between neighbours often feeds upon age-old resentments between communities and individuals. In this regard, in Bosnia, the penetration of militia of the type led by Arkan, supported by sectors of the Yugoslav army, has almost always been the factor triggering and stepping up the violence.

Thus one is led to thinking about massacre as being initiated both “from above” and “from below,” while situating this analysis within an always specific historical context. If there is an “impulse from above” behind the process of destruction (decision and organization of massacre), it is necessary to consider also how this central impulse is applied and taken up by local actors. Attention should therefore be paid to the specific regional history of massacres, as has been suggested in the excellent book by Alison Des Forge on the Gikongoro and Butare provinces of Rwanda, taking care to take account of the specific history of these regions, the structures of local power, the degree of cohesion between groups and communities, their geography and their demographic development.²¹ The remarkable narrative, proposed by the Dutch anthropologist Marc Bax, of the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina (carried out by the Croats) is also exemplary of the interest in the role of local actors (“militia” in the villages) in the unleashing of massacre.²²

Definitively, the carrying out of massacre relates to complex processes constructed both by central and local actors, both adapting their destructive behaviours as a function of the commitment or the intervention of close-by or distant third parties. In sum, massacres are the product of a joint construction of will and context, with the evolution of the latter being able to modify the former. Depending on the reactions of the victims (passiveness, resistance, etc.) and of the surrounding context, those who initiate the process of destruction may adjust or vary their initial project. They also run the risk of precipitating a process of advance flight which, depending on the local actors, may “absorb” targets not originally foreseen. In Vichy France, for example, one is reminded of the case of Pierre Laval who, on his own initiative, proposed adding the children of Jewish parents to the deportations following the Vel d’Hiv “roundup” of 1942 which had been requested by the Nazis. Advance flight may in other circumstances provoke a phenomenon of contagious massacres, as was seen in the Bosnian war, during which the practice of ethnic cleansing was extended to all communities: Serb, Croat and Muslim. All the above validates massacre as a dynamic process, which is certainly organized, but which is also open to rather random variations.

Ordinary monsters, voluntary executioners?

The above does not yet provide an explanation for the taking of action, at the individual level, that of the killer. Certainly, the approach defended here, by means of the study of the process of destruction, implies always taking into account various types of actors responsible for the massacre: the decision-maker who does not kill, the propagandist who does not kill either, the organizer who

rarely kills and, finally, the executioners who are the real “perpetrators.” It is precisely because these executioners are those who carry out the act of massacre that it is useful to study them specifically. Their behaviours and motivations indeed bring together the problems explored above. A specific study must, however, distinguish between the different “positions” of these killers in the process of destruction. In this light, at least four “categories” of killers of civilians should be identified according to whether they are soldiers, police, militia or civilians. Quality studies on each of these groups of killers are rare and unequally proportioned (there is more research on soldiers and police than on militia or civilians). Moreover, these studies above all relate to the extermination of the Jews.

The thesis proposed by the sociologist Daniel Goldhagen, who, for example, supported the existence of a strong destructive anti-Semitism in Germany in the 1930s, puts determinative emphasis on the role of ideology. In his opinion, those who assassinated the Jews were “voluntary executioners” because they were actually convinced of the necessity of what they did.²³ But this unidimensional explanation has inspired lively critiques among historians of which Jean Solchany has provided a good summary.²⁴ In his masterpiece on the massacring perpetrated by a German police battalion in Poland, Christopher Browning proposes a more complex picture of the variables “pre-ordaining” the behaviour of these police-killers, of which I shall refer to four factors. First, the factor of submission to authority in the sense proposed by the psychologist Stanley Milgram, which—*de facto*—established this group of policemen for killing Jews, and which controlled their movements and determined their precise objectives. Nevertheless, this factor of obedience must be put into context, given that it is an argument commonly put forward by the executioners as soon as they find themselves charged before a court of law. This argument is made even more debatable by the fact that the rare men who did not wish to participate in the killings were not sanctioned by their superiors. The behaviour of a killer cannot be understood uniquely by viewing him/her as existing only “vertically” within a given hierarchical system. It is also necessary to take into account the “horizontal functioning” of these killers: many in fact cede to group pressure at the very moment of action. This conformity to group pressure contributes to the limitation of deviant behaviour by valorizing the model of “virile fraternity” the strength of which is measured precisely by the ability to murder civilians. Not “letting down the others” who agree to “do the dirty work” seems, in the final analysis, to be a more determinative factor than obeying orders. This consenting participation in the killings therefore presupposes a complete lack of identification with the victims who are totally excluded from humanity. The ground for this denial of the humanity of “the other to be destroyed” is, in the case of the German policemen, laid down by years of anti-Semitic and nationalistic propaganda. All of these elements do not, however, hinder the traumatic psychological “shock” of the first massacre upon the killers themselves. It is out of this initial shock, and not the inverse, that the brutality of these men is born. Becoming “hardened” in this way, killing becomes a habit: “As during real war,

the horror of the first meeting becomes moulded into routine and the putting to death of human beings becomes increasingly easy.”²⁵

This framework of analysis cannot, however, be applied to all situations of massacre. It can certainly help in understanding the behaviour of other groups of police or soldiers whose mission it is to carry out mass executions. But it is of little use, for example, in the analysis of the functioning of the militia groups or the behaviour of civilians who participate more or less spontaneously in killings. Moreover, the policemen studied by Browning are adults (many were in their 40s) and are not, therefore, representative of many contemporary situations. Indeed, whether it be in Cambodia, Rwanda or Bosnia, killers are generally rather young, without family responsibilities, if not teenagers. Indeed, the procedures for the recruitment of “mass murderers” and their motivations may differ widely from one situation to another. Those in power may rely both on military or police forces (diverted from their main duties), and on *ad hoc* groups and militia established in the sole aim of massacre and pillage. To these ends, certain forces do not hesitate in releasing imprisoned common criminals, as was the case during the Armenian genocide and the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, and giving them the precise mission of killing and/or hunting down civilians while having the opportunity of looting by way of recompense. Such economic incentives seem at times to determine the behaviour of certain killers, to the point that, in Rwanda, some spoke of the *genocide business*. However, in other examples, as in Cambodia, the appropriation of riches is almost absent, the Khmer Rouge abhorring the consumption of capitalist society and simultaneously rejecting the principle of private property.

This multiplicity of variables that influence the individual take action is difficult to pin down and is disturbing for any researcher seeking to establish general “laws.” What appears to be the case for an individual at a certain moment will not hold for another. Indeed, the perpetrators of a massacre may be motivated by incentives that have nothing to do with political legitimization and may seek personal benefit. What remains certain, and rather disturbing from a moral point of view, is the disconcerting ease with which the individual may quickly descend to murdering his fellow human being, as soon as the social conditions favour such an act. In order to explain this phenomenon, certain authors such as John Steiner have used the metaphor of the “sleeping” potential assassin, which lies dormant within each individual, and which may be activated within a favourable context and later return to its latent state.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman considers, however, that this psychological conception of the sleeper is a “useless metaphysical crutch” that cannot replace the fact that cruelty has a fundamentally social origin.²⁶

In this sense, a fruitful line of research would consist of exploring the way in which an individual becomes a mass murderer as a function of the social and cultural norms of the country or the community group in which he grew up. In other words, at the heart of a society in which the law no longer forbids murder at all but rather incites it, how does the single individual “climb” the social ladder according to these new norms and how can he make the behaviours

encouraged by those in power compatible with his own cultural traditions? Two types of study are particularly significant in this light. First, the *biographical interview* such as that carried out by Gita Sereny with Frantz Stangl, ex-commander of the extermination camps at Sobibor and Treblinka. Indeed, this outstanding work, carried out following Stangl's trial,²⁷ allows us to understand the infernal trap in which this Austrian policeman was caught, encouraged by a strong desire for social recognition.²⁸ Furthermore, anthropological studies such as those carried out by Alexander Hinton on the Khmer Rouge also assist us in comprehending how pre-existing cultural models can serve as a launching pad for mass violence.²⁹ This approach goes in the direction of that proposed by René Lemarchand (problem no 2), but at the individual level. Alexander Hinton looks at the story of a Khmer peasant, Lohr, a former soldier of the infamous Tuol Sleng detention centre, who admits to having personally killed some 400 prisoners.³⁰ Hinton attempts to explain his behaviour by showing, by means of Lohr's trajectory, how the codes of honour and obedience of the Khmer culture were used by the Maoist-inspired ideology to induce him to kill his "enemies" unscrupulously.

What is striking about these two narratives, belonging to completely different cultural universes, is not only the culture of obedience (important in both societies), but what these men say about their personal descent into violence. They appear to "forget" their responsibility for carrying out mass murder, retaining only the memory of a traumatic personal event at the height of or preceding this process. For Frantz Stangl, the moment came when, in 1938, the Nazis asked him officially to renounce his Catholicism. He had to sign a declaration to this effect and, in his eyes, this was an important step towards his subsequent corruption; as if he had "sold his soul." It is only with regard to this aspect that he felt responsible: "It is then that everything began for me," he explains. As for Lohr, he first claims to Hinton that he had killed only one or two men. He immediately tells of his first murder, as if it had conditioned all the others, all that was to come and that of which he dared not speak. The scene resembles a type of rite of passage: that day his commander asked him, in the presence of his comrades, if he had ever killed anyone. As he answered that he had not, his superior ordered him to execute a prisoner. Lohr estimates that he was not then in a position to refuse and, in killing his first man, he knew that he was being watched by all.

In both cases, the trap in which the two men are caught provokes a sort of *split* within their personalities, based on a complete emotional detachment from their victims. The question immediately posed by Lohr to his commander, after he had killed for the first time, is significant: "Have you got a frozen heart?"; which Lohr translates in his own terms as "I had to turn off the tap of emotions." In Stangl's case, the distancing process seems particularly powerful. Managing an extermination camp, he seems nevertheless to have never wanted to see death, constructing in his heart of hearts a sort of psychological barrier that kept him at a distance from the horrors of the camp of which he was however the commander in chief. Does becoming a mass murderer in this way, whether one

is the commander or the executioner, not mean undergoing a process of psychological ruin similar to a type of dehumanization?

The sense and the non-sense of atrocities

Is it possible, in the final analysis, to make sense of the atrocities associated with massacre? If the aim is to destroy civilians *en masse*, why in addition make them suffer, humiliate and mutilate them before putting them to death? This is the meaning of Primo Levi's central question: "Why this fruitless violence?"³¹ Why do massacres produce cruelty before, during and even in their aftermath? Should we focus on a "top-down" framework of analysis, by emphasizing, for example, the strategic intention, or rather a schema based on the study of the relations between executioner and victim? Here too I would defend a dialectical approach.

The top-down

It is indeed those in power who create the conditions for the unfolding of the atrocities. Before the massacres (or even during them) their first tool is that of propaganda. Here again, the instrumentalization of the imaginary is to be found (the evocation of the atrocities committed by the enemy) and the more or less open or disguised incitement (depending on the circumstances and who is speaking) to do everything possible in the name of revenge: "They have done this to us, so we may do this to them." In that way, this imaginary of cruelty may in return legitimate doing the same, but this time "for real." Indeed, action coexists with the fantasy of taking action.

Those in power play a central role in "covering for" the executioners, that is, reassuring them that they can act "outside the law" without running the risk of repercussions. This feeling of impunity is already created by the secretive atmosphere within which massacres generally take place; devoid of witnesses. But the message—"do what you want"—may be openly addressed to those who are or may become executioners. The perpetration of atrocities during the process of civilian destruction can itself have a tactical or strategic aim. In this way, during the Bosnian war, the cases of mass rape were interpreted as intentional practices carried out in the aim of ethnic cleansing. The anthropologist Véronique Nahoum-Grappe has spoken in this sense of the "political utilisation of cruelty."³²

This instrumental approach to the atrocities is nevertheless far from being understood in its full complexity. It is necessary also to look at them from the "bottom up," even on the basis of the rumours that circulate in a society in crisis. Indeed, what has been said about the role of propaganda goes equally for the peddling of rumours about the "enemy." From this point of view, is the role of rumour in times of war and/or of civilian massacre really that different? Marc Bloch has looked at the phenomenon as it appeared during the First World War, especially at the rumour that the "Hun cut off the hands of children." The German soldiers certainly did commit atrocities against civilians but they did not

do this. It was one of the most horrible, if not the most horrible, rumours retained by the French population. Nevertheless, it was false. The function of such rumours is to interpret the conflict by means of the demonization of the enemy. Similarly, the activity of propaganda can dip into the reserve of rumours in order to legitimate the destruction of the enemy in advance, by ensuring that he too is made to endure the horrors meted out to innocents.

Are the very conditions of a massacre, carried out within a space of proximity to the victims, implying the *de facto* physical closeness of executioner and victim, necessarily favourable for the unleashing of atrocities? Even if the enemy is pictured in the propaganda as having hideous and dangerous traits, he nevertheless maintains a terribly human face. Is this not the very reason for which it is necessary to “disfigure” quickly this like other, to ward off any risk of identification? Being able to kill implies the other’s dehumanization, no longer “only” by means of propaganda, but now through actions: by mutilating the body, dismembering it, burning it, etc. In sum, proximity generates cruelty and may lead to an escape into savagery, to curbing any real empathy between executioner and victim. In this way, the practice of cruelty is a veritable mental operation on the body of the other aimed at the destruction of his humanity. According to the psychologist Françoise Sironi, it is the very essence of torture.³³

If the practices of cruelty are rooted in the psychology of the executioners, then the latter may be characterized by specific cultural traits. The sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky is correct in his observation of a sort of “universal of massacre.”³⁴ However, are the methods of massacring and of causing suffering before a massacre not above all cultural acts, as has been suggested by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai? In his view, violence committed against the body takes on a precise meaning according to the cultural context in which it develops: “It is clear that the violence inflicted on the human body in ethnic contexts is never entirely random or lacking in cultural form [...] that even the worst acts of degradation [...] have macabre forms of cultural design, and violent predictability.”³⁵ Practices of cruelty may be, for the executioner, a means of affirming his/her own identity upon the body of the victims, which could also imply compelling them to transgress their own cultural taboos. It is another means of destroying the victims before killing them.

Understood in this way, the perpetration of atrocities would thus be a means for the executioner to create a radical psychological distance from the victims, to prove—*de facto*—that which he already believes or what he allows himself to believe: they are not human beings. It is worth noting that if they do not arrive at this understanding they expose themselves to being psychologically touched by the humanity of their victims. They therefore run the risk of “cracking” and being overtaken by depression or madness. It is notably for this reason that the Nazis developed the more industrialized extermination of the gas chambers instead of the procedures of mass machinegun killings practised by the *Einsatzgruppen*. But even in this case, the system had to prevent the idea that human beings were being killed. To the question posed by Gita Sereny to the former commander of Sobibor and Treblinka, “seeing as you killed them all, what was

the sense in such humiliation?,” Frantz Stangl replies, “for conditioning those who had to materially carry out the operations, to make it possible for them to do what they did.”³⁶ In other words, the atrocities in this case had a clearly functional use: to condition the future executioners.

Beyond the repulsion that they evoke, should studying these atrocities not lead us finally to envisaging a more general, and rather disturbing, approach: that of the pleasure that they may provoke in the executioner? It is known and admitted that “if the practices of violence are so widespread so as to appear inherent to the human condition, it is also due to the fact that they induce pleasure, a certainly unhealthy, ambiguous pleasure,” as has been noted by the psychologist Denise Van Caneghem.³⁷ Humiliating the other and, moreover, making him suffer may result in a sort of pleasure; either in making sexual use of the body or in battering this body in various ways before annihilating it. Is this sadism? In the psychiatric sense of the term, according, for example, to Bruno Bettelheim, executioners (apart from a tiny minority) do not have a sadistic personality. But the situation in which the executioner finds himself, that of being able to transgress all taboos, instils in him the drunkenness of total power over the victim. This doing away with the law, that by definition makes the executioner–victim relation an antisocial one, permits individuals to develop particularly pleasurable sadistic and perverse behaviours. In his fine text on torture, the former resistance member and deportee Jean Amérie does not hesitate to write that the deep understanding of that which he himself experienced (having been tortured by the Nazis) is not provided by psychology, “but according to the categories ... well yes, of the philosophy of the Marquis de Sade.”³⁸ The work of the philosopher George Bataille (who has worked on the writings of Sade) should be cited in that he notes that sadism should not be understood as a sexual psychological state but rather as an existential psychological state based on the principle of the radical destruction of the other.

This reference may be surprising. But does research in history, sociology and political science not return us to the questions which literature, and art more generally, have already explored? Would this not be the case here for Sade’s demonized work? In *Justine*, he describes well the drunkenness of violence that induces pleasure from the suffering it inflicts upon victims, from which comes the need to begin again to take pleasure from their humiliation and their cries before killing them and then to start again on other bodies, other prey. This vertigo created by violence, which could be expressed in literature—I think here too of the enlightened book by the Danish author Jean-Martin Eriksen³⁹—draws us near to this “black hole,” a place of emptiness and mystery, belonging to our destructiveness.

The reader may take from the vocabulary of massacre and genocide sketched here the outlines of a syntax, a dynamic model of a process of destruction the particularity of which evolves within the time and space of a given crisis: a multi-factoral model with, at its core, the matrix of an imaginary which, according to its fears, resentments and utopias, shapes and reshapes the social body, razing and eliminating enemy beings. A model with multiple variables, the

act of massacre being determined both by local parameters (the organization of the killers, the nature of their methods as well as geography, the structure of the target population, etc.) and by the international context (the role of war, public opinion, a dominating power, etc.). A model that while following the central direction is, nevertheless, not predetermined and may go through unplanned variation and developments according to the complicity or resistance of third parties. Social science must be able to provide a better understanding of all of this. Having said this, these elements are still limited in their capacity to make sense of these often astonishing phenomena. Undoubtedly the social sciences could provide a better analysis of the nature of this black hole and could surely even estimate its elementary structure. But an unknown dimension shall always remain: an implacable zone of darkness.

Notes and References

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2. For my approach to the notion of “genocide” in relation to that of “massacre,” see Jacques Semelin, “From massacre to the genocidal process,” *International Social Sciences Journal*, No 174, November 2002. Q2
3. To be sure this precise figure may be contested, but not the scope it reveals. Cf Rudolph J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 1994).
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8. René Lemarchand, “Comparing the killing fields: Rwanda, Cambodia, Bosnia,” unpublished, 2001.
9. Intervention at the CERI research group, “Making peace: from mass crime to peace-building,” February 8, 2001. See the CERI website: <<http://www.ceri-sciences-po.org>> .
10. See Alexander L. Hinton, ed., *Genocide: An Anthropological Reader* (Malde, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); and *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (San Francisco: California University Press, 2002).
11. Denis-Constant Martin, *Cartes d'identité: Comment dit-on “nous” en politique?* (Paris: Presses de Sciences-Po, 1994), pp 31–32.
12. Article 2: “[G]enocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.”
13. Although the common parlance often invites us to do so when, for example, it is said that “France or the US has the intention of ...”
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17. The historian of the Ottoman Empire, Gilles Veinstein, has contested their “genocidal” nature, a position which has triggered lively polemics, including a response from Yves Ternon. Cf Gilles Veinstein, “Trois questions sur un massacre,” *L'Histoire*, No 187, April 1995, pp 40–41; Yves Ternon, *Du négationnisme. Mémoire et tabou* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1999).
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27. An important detail as the interviewee no longer had to conform his statements to a defence that could reduce his punishment.
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