

Genocide

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Introduction

WHEN IN 1976 RAYMOND WILLIAMS PUBLISHED HIS FAMOUS BOOK, *KEYWORDS*, genocide was not among the discussed terms. Neither was Holocaust nor human rights, though he did include an entry on 'humanity'. The subtitle indicated his remit: 'A Vocabulary of Culture and Society'. A Marxist charting the transformations of western societies wrought by capitalism, Williams was interested in the historical semantics of words like class and art, industry and democracy that registered the unfolding and effects of European modernity. His book was, accordingly, not only Eurocentric, but western Eurocentric, reflecting the experience of that part of the world over the last two centuries. The fact that Williams, born in 1921 and a veteran of the Second World War, did not include the words that many today regard as central for articulating our experience—words which come out of that war—points not only to the rapid transitions in keyword shelf life but also to the particularity of experience.

Williams was well aware that the meaning of words varied over time and between classes of people. He wrote that such variations occurred 'because they embody different experiences, and readings of experience, and this will continue to be true, in active relationships and conflicts, over and above the clarifying exercises of scholars or committees' (Williams, *Keywords* 24). So he would not have objected, I suspect, to an augmentation of his approach that reflects the experience of non-Europeans, let alone of southern and eastern Europeans. New

keywords might include invasion, occupation, exile and genocide. As a historian, I follow Williams in wanting to understand words that congeal what he called 'structures of feeling' or 'structures of experience'; that is, 'meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt ... specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships'. He was interested in pre-theoretical social experience that, by escaping the regimentation and 'fixed forms' of 'bourgeois culture', was a source of generative artistic creativity and political imagination (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 131-2).

It is not difficult to see that the genocide keyword appeals to those in thrall to what Mircea Eliade called the 'terror of history', the traumatic consciousness of group subjugation or destruction. If anything is a structure of feeling, it is the terror of disappearing from or losing agency in 'history' (Moses, 'Genocide and the Terror of History'). Since its appearance in international discussions in the second half of the 1940s, genocide became a keyword in all parts of the world to capture this affective element of consciousness. Genocide was widely alleged by all sides soon after the Partition of India in the late 1940s, and it featured in the political vocabulary of the African-American civil rights struggle, and African and Asian post-colonial conflicts; some examples include the 'We Charge Genocide' petition in the US in 1951 (Curthoys and Docker), Congo in the early 1960s, Rwanda in 1963-4, the Nigeria-Biafra civil war between 1966-70, the conflict in East Pakistan in 1971, and in Burundi a year later. At the same time, exiled members of the nations occupied by the Soviet Union accused it of genocide in terms of the destruction of national elites, deportations and suppression of their culture. In the 1970s, campaigners for Soviet Jewry placed advertisements in the *New York Times* alleging the 'spiritual genocide' of Jews because of Soviet persecution and assimilation policies. At the same time, some African American leaders complained of genocide in relation to the neglect of inner city neighbourhoods and anxieties expressed about allegedly high birth-rates in the African American community. What these examples also show is that genocide was and is taken to mean much more than mass murder, which is its usual understanding in the West because of its implicit affiliation with another keyword of historical trauma, Holocaust.

To understand the keyword of genocide, then, a comparative frame is also necessary. This approach, too, is in keeping with Williams, who highlighted the importance of understanding words in clusters, as related to and overlapping with other terms that gesture to, inform and articulate particular structures of feeling. Words cannot be understood satisfactorily in isolation but must be inserted into discourses about matters of political import, although he did not intend to reduce meaning to context; if a word's 'own internal developments and structures' were related to 'processes of connection and interaction' within semantic clusters, it was not a matter of 'relations between simple units'. Rather,

their meanings were mutually constituted in complex interaction (Williams, *Keywords* 23).

The genocide keyword grew out of, and was inserted into, a semantic field that includes terms laden with meanings from the history of western colonialism, namely the familiar trinity of savagery, barbarism and civilization. As we will see briefly below, an intellectual and discourse history of the genocide concept reveals that for Western Europeans, Americans and Australians, it emanated from this tradition of understanding the relations between whites and non-whites and, within white society, between elites and non-elites. That is, Indigenous people were seen as savages and as committing savage acts—what we today would call massacres and genocide—while Asians, who stood slightly higher on the civilizational ladder, would be seen as committing acts of barbarism. Or Indigenous people were seen to have wilted before the mark of civilization. Thus Charles Darwin opined that ‘When civilized nations come into contact with barbarians, the struggle is short, except where a deadly climate gives aid to a native race’ (Darwin 190). Westerners applied the same vocabulary to Ottoman massacres of Christians within its empire, and to pogroms against Jews in the Russian empire: these attacks targeted religious groups and ethnicities on the basis of their identity in what today would be called hate crimes; the Ottoman and Romanov empires were barbarous in this respect (Bass; Rodogno). Within Europe, the Parisian communards in 1871 and other revolutionary actors were said to be savage, and so on (Traverso). European imperial elites could accuse one another of barbarism, as in Imperial Germany’s indignation about the French use of African troops during the First World War and, soon after, the victorious Allies’ judgment about German colonial rule in Africa (Horne and Kramer; Silvester and Gewalt). All sides levelled the charge of barbarism when convenient.

These keywords also had a critical ‘internal’ application (Offe). ‘Savages’ could be victims of the barbarous West. Before Darwin, the philosopher Immanuel Kant ironically invoked civilization to suggest that modernity made Europeans the more efficient barbarians (79; Muthu). For his part, the literary critic Walter Benjamin suggested they were all barbaric: ‘there is no document of culture that is not also a document of barbarism’, he famously wrote in an over-cited aphorism (256), drawing on Rosa Luxemburg’s posited choice of ‘socialism or barbarism’. Reflecting on Nazi regime and the war, his friends Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno set out to discover ‘nothing less than the discovery of why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new barbarism’ (xi). Whatever its application, civilization implied a hierarchy of human community with versions of Europe at its apex. Indeed, Europe constituted itself by categorizing others—or its own imperialist-capitalist excesses—as either barbarous or savage. The nineteenth-century discourse of

'humanitarian intervention' was predicated on this assumption (Orford), as was subsequent Soviet anti-imperial imperialism (Westad).

We know that genocide emanated from this semantic field because the lawyer who coined this keyword, Raphael Lemkin, used these terms. First, in 1933, he suggested barbarism and vandalism as new international crimes to the League of Nations; then, ten years later, in his book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, he combined them to form his neologism, genocide. There he quoted with approval the Allies' Joint Declaration, which condemned the 'barbarous Hitlerite tyranny' (Lemkin, *Axis Rule* 89). In doing so, he reflected the consensus at the time. For example, British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden told the House of Commons that he had read reports 'regarding the barbarous and inhuman treatment to which Jews are being subjected in German-occupied Poland' (Schabas 35). The prominent North American law professor Ellery Stowell regarded the Nazi abuse of the international norm of military retaliation as its most serious infraction, quoting with approval US Major General Halleck from 1912 to the effect that 'inconsiderate retaliation removes belligerents farther and farther from the mitigating rules of regular ways, and by rapid steps leads them nearer to the internecine war of savages'. Regular warfare, Halleck declared, was fought by 'civilised governments and among all Christian people', and Stowell agreed (649-50).

The prosecutors at the subsequent Nuremberg trials also referred to Nazi crimes in this manner, as did delegates at the United Nations. The UN Resolution on Genocide in 1946 stated that genocide was 'condemned by the civilized world', and two years later the preamble to the UN Declaration on Human Rights referred to 'barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind'. Universally, Nazism was interpreted as a reversion to barbarism, whether as a throwback to pre-Christian Europe, to the wars of religion or, for Churchill, 'to the Mongol invasions of Europe in the sixteenth century' (Churchill 6474; Steiner viii; Smith). When the Australian delegation at the United Nations signed up to the new genocide prevention regime in the late 1940s, it did so in the firm conviction that white Australians did not commit genocide, and never had: that was something for the Nazis, whose crimes were depicted as barbarous akin to Ghengis Khan. Genocide is what *they* did.

Genocide, then, is a Janus-faced keyword, at once expressing the experiences of history's victims while also clustered in a semantic field occupied by history's victors, the 'civilized' colonial powers. To explain this tension, I briefly examine its creator, Raphael Lemkin and the subject positions from which he thought. In the first section, I show how the word reflected Lemkin's membership of an exiled and persecuted people, the Jews, and a repeatedly partitioned and occupied people, the Poles. In the next section, I argue that he coined the word to

mediate between the experienced particularity of what we now call the Holocaust and the abstract universality of crimes against humanity. Unlike crimes against humanity, genocide specifically criminalizes the destruction of ethnic, national and religious groups. At the same time, unlike any particular crime, such as the Holocaust, it is a generic concept. Then I briefly address this keyword's implication in western colonialism. The tension is unavoidable, I suggest, because any renegotiation of global norms, as occurred after the Second World War, will necessarily establish a threshold of the unacceptable—like the prohibition on genocide and human rights violations. In doing so, those norms would be articulated in a vocabulary inherited from the dominant European 'standard of civilization' discourse, with its colonial baggage (Gong; Anghie). In this way, the 'critical cosmopolitanism' (Mignolo) contained in the concept was mitigated by its complicity in the imperialism Lemkin criticized as responsible for genocide, and that is often contained in discourses of humanitarian intervention.

Lemkin and 'Critical Cosmopolitanism'

It is no accident that Lemkin, a Jew from Eastern Europe, where consciousness and experience of religion and nationality were so intense and where Jews had lived in unequal and occasionally violent relations with Christian neighbours for centuries, invented a concept to name the destruction of cultural groups and press for its criminalization. Lemkin's complex hybridity—the product of a religious Jewish upbringing and secular legal training imbued with Polish patriotism—was a necessary precondition for the genocide concept's 'thinkability'. This subaltern subject position predisposed him to identify with history's victims while his Jewish religious education equipped him with the conceptual resources to transcend the particularism/universalism tension evident in alternative approaches to understanding Nazi crimes. As feminist and Indigenous standpoint theory has shown, social outsiders can resist majoritarian experience based on their affective experiences of oppression and exclusion; theirs are structures of experience from below that produce theories of unmasking and emancipation (Collins; Nakata). Lemkin can thus be inserted into the lineage of 'critical cosmopolitans' who the Argentine thinker Walter Mignolo says engage in 'epistemic disobedience' by regarding the Enlightenment and Western modernity from the outside, as the 'to be included' in a posited utopian plurality of voices. Mignolo mentions de Vitoria, Kant and Marx as critical cosmopolitans because of their admirable critique of empire, but prefers 'decolonial' due to their residual Eurocentrism: they still believed in the superiority of a western civilization shorn of its imperialist excesses (54, 257). Lemkin also shared in their evocation of civilization.

Raised in an observant Jewish environment in which children studied the Bible and Jewish literature, his imagination was accordingly animated by the fate of nations and peoples. Perhaps common Yiddish phrases were formative: ‘May his name and memory be blotted out’ was the standard refrain about an enemy, itself derivative of the Biblical verse ‘I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek’ (Exodus, 17:14; cf. Deuteronomy 25:19), the Amalek being the congenital enemy of ancient Jews. The Jewish festivals of Passover and Purim commemorate escapes from slavery and genocide respectively; during the latter the name of then Persian prime minister, Haman, a descendant of the Amalek, is met with booing and other noise in order to ‘blot’ it out. We can only speculate how these rituals impacted on Lemkin, but this background cannot be ignored in accounting for his worldview. The survival of Jews over the millennia, the maintenance of their traditions, their cultural flourishing in the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, where the vast majority of world Jewry lived and, equally, the intense consciousness that peoples and their memories could be entirely erased—this was the cultural milieu and drama in which Lemkin was steeped. This consciousness was likely impressed on the young Lemkin who heard about pogroms, like that in Białystok, 50 miles away, in 1906, when he was six years old.

Another key element in Lemkin’s formation was the ancient Hebrew prophetic tradition. Introduced to the prophets as a boy by his teacher, Lemkin felt drawn to their example and message about solidarity with the poor and downtrodden: suffering for their struggle, their ‘words lived long for they were deeds dressed as words’, he wrote in his autobiography.¹ From Isaiah’s call to ‘Cease to do evil; learn to do well; relieve the oppressed; judge the fatherless; plead for the widow’ (Isaiah 1:17), he drew a redemptive conclusion: it ‘sounded to me so urgent, as if the oppressed stood now outside our door. The appeals for peace by converting swords into ploughshares seemed to recreate his presence’ (Lemkin, *Totally Unofficial Man*). What made his imagination cosmopolitan rather than merely tribal was the Jewish tradition of *Tikkun Olam*: healing the world and caring for all the oppressed, irrespective of nationality (Rosenthal).²

The hints Lemkin left in his autobiography indicate that, as a boy, he had also read widely about the persecution of human cultural groups since antiquity, beginning with the Roman Emperor Nero’s attempted extermination of Christians. By learning about the travails of many ethnic groups over the centuries—the Huguenots of France, Catholics in Japan, Muslims in Spain—he concluded that ethnic destruction was a universal and enduring problem, linking

¹ Donna-Lee Frieze published the autobiography with Yale University Press in 2013.

² The full phrase is *Tikkun olam b’malchut Shaddai*: repairing a [broken] world beneath God’s sovereignty. Thanks to Steven Leonard Jacobs for assistance with this concept in relation to Lemkin.

Jewish and non-Jewish experiences. While the persecution of Jews was part of this sorry tale—indeed, he called them ‘that classical victim of genocide’ (Lemkin, ‘Genocide in Economics’)—his sympathies were for people everywhere; their suffering was part of the same human story: ‘A line of blood led from the Roman arena through the gallows of France to the pogrom of Białystok’ (Lemkin, 2002, 370-72).

This cosmopolitan rather than sectarian moral imagination carefully negotiated the differences and similarities between cases of genocide, avoiding the temptation either to flatten out or to hypostasize distinctions. Lemkin thus couched his appeal to end genocide not in terms of abstract human rights and individual suffering, let alone crimes against humanity, but in relation to an ideal of world civilization whose constituent parts were national, religious and racial groups.

I identified myself more and more with the sufferings of the victims, whose numbers grew, and I continued my study of history. I understood that the function of memory is not only to register past events, but to stimulate human conscience. Soon contemporary examples of genocide followed, such as the slaughter of the Armenians. It became clear to me that the diversity of nations, religious groups and races is essential to civilization because every one of these groups has a mission to fulfil and a contribution to make in terms of culture. To destroy these groups is opposed to the will of the Creator and to disturb the spiritual harmony of mankind. I have decided to become a lawyer and work for the outlawing of Genocide and for its prevention through the cooperation of nations. These nations must be made to understand that an attack on one of them is an attack on them all. (Lemkin, ‘Autobiography’)

Lemkin was a proponent of what the sociologist Rogers Brubaker calls ‘groupism’: ‘the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations, and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed’, that is, to regard them as ‘internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes’ (Brubaker 35). Others might say that he was a ‘primordialist’ who reified groups as ‘given entities that are held constant throughout the analysis’ (Cederman 412). This commitment baffles western liberals who can see in Lemkin’s national cosmopolitanism either fundamental confusion or an anachronistic return to what one called ‘medieval organic imagery’ (Holmes; Ignatieff). Closer inspection reveals a coherent, if historically specific worldview.

Central was his attachment, as noted above, to the notion of ‘spiritual nationality’, a concept that most likely can be traced to Jewish sources as well perhaps as to Herder, the German philosopher who defended Indigenous

languages and the uniqueness of cultures, making him a hero to romantic nationalists like Giuseppe Mazzini, Alexander Herzen and Thomas Masaryk (Barnard 12). There are possible connections with the ‘autonomism’ of Russian-Jewish historian Simon Dubnow, who wrote of Jewish nationality that, as ‘a spiritual or historical-cultural nation, deprived of any possibility of aspiring to political triumph, of seizing territory by force or of subjecting other nations to cultural domination, it is concerned only with one thing: protecting its national individuality and safeguarding its autonomous development in all states everywhere in the Diaspora’ (Dubnow 97; Rabinovich). Lemkin met the great historian during his flight from Poland; unlike Lemkin, Dubnow did not escape the Nazis. Both men were drawn to notions of cultural autonomy because they believed in multi-ethnic states with minority protection rather than monocultural states tied to specific plots of land that oppressed minorities. If Lemkin was seemingly attracted to Herder’s romantic notion of cultural individuality, however, he was also wary of integral nationalism: nationality rather than nationalism. Lemkin was likely influenced by Karl Renner, the non-Jewish Austro-Marxist, to whom Lemkin wrote an effusive letter of praise as an inspiration for his ideas (Cooper 91-2).

Culture was so central to Lemkin’s conception of genocide because he thought nationality—which was what a law about genocide was supposed to protect—comprised different elements. After the war, Lemkin drew on the anthropology of Sir James Frazer and especially fellow Pole Bronislaw Malinowski to flesh out his thinking. Malinowski’s theory of culture allowed Lemkin to cast his Eastern European primordialist intuitions in the language of modern social science. From Frazer and Malinowski, he took the proposition that culture derived from the pre-cultural needs of a biological life. He called it ‘derived needs’ or ‘cultural imperatives’, which were as constitutive for human group life as individual physical wellbeing (i.e., ‘basic needs’). Culture integrated society and enabled the fulfilment of individual basic needs because it constituted the systematic totality of a variety of inter-related institutions, practices, and beliefs. Culture ensured an internal equilibrium and stability. These ‘so-called derived needs’, Lemkin wrote, ‘are just as necessary to their existence as the basic physiological needs’. He elaborated the point thus: ‘These needs find expression in social institutions or, to use an anthropological term, the culture ethos. If the culture of a group is violently undermined, the group itself disintegrates and its members must either become absorbed in other cultures which is a wasteful and painful process or succumb to personal disorganization and, perhaps, physical destruction’ (Lemkin, ‘The Concept of Genocide’). Consequently, he concluded, ‘the destruction of cultural symbols is genocide’. Because culture incarnated the identity of peoples, Lemkin supported the intention of the national minority treaties of the League of Nations, although he regarded them as a political failure. Minorities should not be forcibly assimilated.

His holistic conception of genocide, I suggest, reflects the experience of persecuted, occupied and exiled peoples for whom cultural obliteration is as threatening as physical insecurity. In fact, in the experience of occupation, the distinctions seem moot, as the perceived intention of the occupier is to destroy or cripple—a term he used—the Indigenous people as a collectivity. Not for nothing do Indigenous leaders conceive of genocidal policies in terms so similar to Lemkin. Consider this summary by an Australian Indigenous leader:

While the 1788 invasion was unjust, the real injustice was the denial by [Governor] Phillip and subsequent governments of our right to participate equally in the future of a land we had managed successfully for millenniums. Instead, the land was stolen, not shared. Our political sovereignty was replaced by a virulent form of serfdom; our spiritual beliefs denied and ridiculed; our system of education undermined. We were no longer able to inculcate our young with the complex knowledge that is acquired from intimate engagement with the land and its waterways. The introduction of superior weapons, alien diseases, a policy of racism and enforced biogenetic practices created dispossession, a cycle of slavery and attempted destruction of our society. The 1997 report *Bringing Them Home* highlighted the infringement of the UN definition of genocide and called for a national apology and compensation of those Aborigines who had suffered under laws that destroyed Indigenous societies and sanctioned biogenetic modification of the Aboriginal people. (Dodson)

Dodson's statement is the answer to those, like the historian Inga Clendinnen, who equate genocide with mass killing:

when I see the word 'genocide', I still see Gypsies and Jews being herded into trains, into pits, into ravines, and behind them the shadowy figures of Armenian women and children being marched into the desert by armed men. I see deliberate mass murder: innocent people identified by their killers as distinctive entities being done to death by organised authority. I believe that to take the murder out of genocide is to render it vacuous. (Clendinnen)

Ironically, in view of Clendinnen's reaction, it was the unpunished genocide of the Armenians that prompted Lemkin in the 1920s and 1930s to begin thinking about a word to name their experience. Mass killing did not capture its genocidal essence, like the destruction of their cultural presence. As a Jew and a Pole, he identified with 'small nations' caught between rival empires. For them, nurturing national and religious culture was the only option for survival in the absence of a state, so acknowledging the cultural dimension was anything but vacuous. In this, Lemkin differed from, say, Hannah Arendt, who had few sympathies for 'non-historical peoples' (Moses, *Das römische Gespräch*).

A Mediating Concept

Misunderstanding this cosmopolitanism, some of Lemkin's commentators have accused him of illegitimately conflating the experiences of Jews and other groups, and of succumbing to a false (Pauline) universalism, even implying that he did so for careerist reasons. The implicit charge that he neglected the metahistorical significance of the Holocaust is also based on the proposition that he did not fully understand the ambition of the Nazi genocide of Jews when he coined the term genocide (Cooper 10, 23, 58-9; Bauer 211-2, 215; Katz 129-30 n.15). Ironically, or perhaps predictably, Israeli scholars can find Lemkin a perplexing figure because his subjectivity is non-Zionist but not the easily dismissible anti-Zionist 'non-Jewish Jew' caricature (Michman 441). If they are understandably wary of a false (Pauline) universalism that occludes the Holocaust's distinctiveness, however, it is the notion of crimes against humanity rather than genocide that should be their target, because the abstraction of the former correlates more closely to Christianity.

However Jewish Lemkin's roots and sympathies—he wrote for Jewish and Zionist newspapers in the 1920s while working as a lawyer in Poland—he seemingly did not become a Zionist or devote exclusive attention to the Jewish experience in World War II. Being a Polish patriot and advocate for all cultures never entailed renouncing his Jewish heritage. His Jewish identity was not structured like a zero sum game. He always mentioned the genocidal persecution of the Jews by the Nazis in the same breath as the mass murder of Polish Christians, Roma, and other victims.

Indeed, Lemkin thought the Nazis' policies unprecedented towards a number of victim groups, not just Jews, linking them to the 'barbarous practices' of antiquity and medieval periods:

The above-described techniques of genocide represent an elaborate, almost scientific, system developed to an extent never before achieved by any nation. Hence the significance of genocide and the need to review international law in the light of the German practices of the present war. These practices have surpassed in their unscrupulous character any procedures or methods imagined a few decades ago by the framers of the Hague Regulations. Nobody at that time could conceive that an occupant would resort to the destruction of nations by barbarous practices reminiscent of the darkest pages of history. (Lemkin, *Axis Rule* 90)

For all that, Lemkin was acutely conscious of the distinctive Jewish experience. Although he fled his native Poland in 1939, he was well informed about

subsequent Nazi rule, devoting a separate chapter in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* to the Nazi treatment of Jews; it outlined the 'special status' for them in every conquered country, as well as noting that they were 'one of the main objects of German genocide policy'. Indeed, they were 'to be destroyed completely'. He knew about the extermination camps (Lemkin, *Axis Rule* 89, 81. Cf. 21-2; 77; 249-50). His analysis of Nazi policy towards the Jews exemplifies his deft touch, shuttling back and forth between the specificities of the Jewish case and its similarities with other genocides.

His basic point, however, was that genocide named a single evil—the destruction of peoples: 'Genocide is a new word, but the evil it describes is old. It is as old like [*sic.*] the history of mankind. It was necessary, however, to coin this new word because the accumulation of this evil and its devastating effects became extremely strong in our own days' (Lemkin, 'Introduction'). For that reason, he explained, 'All cases of genocide, although their background and conditions vary, follow, for the most part, the same pattern. The object of destruction is a specific human group' (Lemkin, 'Memorandum'). This was the 'common element' that required criminalization.

Becoming a lawyer was a logical choice for a young man with such a formation. Leaving aside the religious Jewish commitment to divine law, the attraction of the legal profession in Imperial Russia and later Poland was that it enabled what Benjamin Nathans has called the 'professionalization of *shtadlanut*' or Jewish intercession. As the reformed Russian legal system offered Jews more opportunities to challenge discrimination against them, the secular law began to loom large as a vehicle for *tikkun olam* (320-34).

In Sweden until 1941, Lemkin collected Nazi occupation documents and published them with extended commentary in *Axis Rule*, the book in which he introduced the genocide concept. In terms of Lemkin's view of historical progress, the Nazi occupation marked a dramatic regression to 'the wars of extermination, which occurred in ancient times and in the Middle Ages', when the distinction between civilians and combatants was not well observed. This was how he described pre-modern genocide in *Axis Rule*:

As classical examples of wars of extermination in which nations and groups of the population were completely or almost completely destroyed, the following may be cited: the destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C.; the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in 72 A.D.; the religion wars of Islam and the Crusades; the massacres of the Albigenses and the Waldenses; and the siege of Magdeburg in the Thirty Years War [May 1631]. Special wholesale massacres occurred in the wars waged by Genghis Khan and by Tamerlane. (Lemkin, *Axis Rule* 80 n.3; Cooper 54)

The difference between barbarism and civilization was the distinction between civilians and combatants, and he saw international law as advancing this marker of civilization.

Already while he was lobbying the UN Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of Genocide (1948), Lemkin turned to popularizing and legitimating his new concept by writing a major academic study of genocide. His correspondence with funding organizations and publishers shows that he was soliciting interest in a book on the subject as early as 1947 and that he had produced substantial draft chapters by the next year (Lemkin, *Lemkin on Genocide*).³ Wanting to encourage the ratification of the UN genocide convention, he noted that ‘The historical analysis is designed to prove that genocide is not an exceptional phenomenon, but that it occurs in intergroup relations with a certain regularity like homicide takes place in relations between individuals’.⁴ Lemkin’s point was that genocide was not sacred but profane, to use Durkheim’s distinction; far from the irruption of the inexplicable and irrational into normal life, it was the outcome of explicable social interactions.

This agenda naturally told against making the Holocaust, still less genocide, a meta-historical, singular event; after all, why devote a lifetime to criminalizing something that is so rare and specific that it is unlikely to recur? Moreover, how could countries be convinced to ratify the Genocide Convention if they thought it really pertained only to the Nazi Holocaust of Jews and therefore did not immediately concern them? Regarding his lobbying of UN delegates, he said that his *Axis Rule* book and ‘the Nazi experience was not a sufficient basis for a definition of genocide for international purposes. One cannot describe a crime by one criminal experience alone; one must (rather) draw on all available experiences of the past’ (Lemkin, ‘Totally Unofficial Man’ 390). Accordingly, Lemkin routinely referred to the world history of genocide in his public advocacy of ratification, although he told the World Jewish Congress to use the ‘Jewish tragedy’ in its campaign for the US to ratify the Genocide Convention (College Roundtable).

From the point of view of the Holocaust’s absolute uniqueness, however, even genocide is too much of an abstraction. Consider the Harvard sociologist Nathan Glazer’s recent anxiety that ‘The other genocides that have taken their place alongside the Jewish genocide ... have the capacity to reduce the distinctiveness

³ His research was financed by a special ‘Genocide Research Fund’ at Yale Law School, to which donors contributed. See Harry Starr, Lucius N. Littauer Foundation to Lemkin, 13 February 1951, American Jewish Historical Society, Lemkin Collection, P-154, Box 8, Folder 10.

⁴ Lemkin to Paul Fejos, Viking Fund, 22 July 1948, American Jewish Historical Society, Lemkin Collection, P-154, Box 8, Folder 10.

and weight of the Jewish genocide in response to genocide in general' (153-4). He continues:

The efforts that the Nazis devoted to the extermination of Jews reduced these other efforts to sideshows. The scale of the Holocaust reduces all comparable genocides to lesser representatives of the genre—indeed, so much lesser as to raise the question of whether the same term should apply to all. The Jews also played a much, much larger role in European and modern society, and in its distinctive achievements than the other targets who the Nazis believed consisted of unworthy life. Finally and most markedly, the extermination of the Jews was carried out by the most advanced representatives of Western civilization, using the most advanced technologies. The contrast with other genocides, carried out by societies considered backward or deficient from the point of view of advanced Western civilization—the Ottoman Turks, the Hutus of Rwanda, the Sudanese Arabs—is so marked as to suggest that these other genocides are of a different order of significance altogether. The destruction of the Jews has to raise the most serious and the deepest questions of its meaning, not only to Jews but also for the entire Western world they have so signally influenced. (154)

This is the establishment Jewish view advocated by the Institute of Jewish Affairs, a think tank founded by the American and World Jewish Congresses in 1941 to document and publicize the Nazis' persecution of European Jews as a whole. It consulted for the American prosecutors at the International Military Tribunal (IMT, i.e., the Nuremberg Trials) in the formulation of a 'Jewish indictment' and lobbied for a separate trial dedicated to the Nazi conspiracy to annihilate European Jewry. There was little interest in other Nazi victims. Indeed, the institute's director, Jacob Robinson, was indignant that the IMT's genocide indictment coupled Jews and Gypsies, accusing it of 'the Nazi method of humiliation of the Jews' (Lewis 200). In this vein, Glazer concludes that 'Perhaps it was a mistake, from the point of view of Jewish interests, to coin and popularize the term and to reduce the Jewish case to only one, if still the most spectacular example' (153).

At the same time, the IMT was attracted to the concept of crimes against humanity that drew on earlier Western European concerns about the treatment of Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire (Brand 108-11). These rival approaches were dialectically related, the one provoking the other without satisfactory resolution. Thus, like many others, the US Chief of Counsel in Nuremberg, Robert Jackson, sought to play down the trial's 'racial' aspects so as not to exacerbate antisemitism or allow the IMT to be depicted as a Jewish 'vengeance trial'. On the whole, the Allies played on such antisemitic stereotypes by subsuming the Jewish case 'within the general Nazi policies of repression and

persecution', that is, crimes against humanity (Bloxham 57-67). This position was advocated by Lemkin's rival, the prominent Jewish jurist Hersh Lauterpacht, who objected to the notion of collective or group personality that Lemkin championed; his advocacy of crimes against humanity was highly influential with the British delegation at Nuremberg (Vrdoljak).

Lemkin's achievement was to have invented a term of universal applicability that simultaneously registered the particularity—that is, the 'groupness' and racial aspects—of the Nazi destruction of Jews, including his own extended family. That is why he called genocide a 'generic notion' with 'common elements' (Lemkin, *Axis Rule* 80). As a lawyer, he wanted authorities to legislate a new crime of group destruction, and such a crime would be necessarily generally applicable rather than particular; criminalizing the Holocaust (a term he did not use) alone would mean that only Jews would be protected; the challenge was to protect all peoples. Unlike crimes against humanity, which targeted civilians generally, genocide gestured to the 'racial' (to use the terminology of the time) or national identity of the victim. It protected vulnerable group existence.

Lemkin's view, as we have seen, was a non-hierarchical understanding of world civilization comprising different cultures and nations. With the failure of the attempt to have the IMT incorporate the 'Jewish indictment', the World Jewish Congress agreed with Lemkin that the Genocide Convention was in all nations' interests. This spirit was taken up by scholars in the nascent field of genocide studies in the 1970s and 80s against the claim that the terms Holocaust and genocide referred only to the Nazi destruction of Jews and could not be 'shared' with others (Horowitz). To their credit, genocide scholars (as they called themselves) always opposed the proposition that the Holocaust was the only genocide in human history, though some regarded it as the most extreme genocide (Fein 43). In this way, they continued a nineteenth-century humanitarian sensibility concerned with the fate of Christians in the Ottoman Empire and Jews in the Russian Empire; intervention on their behalf was urged in the name of 'humanity', 'civilization', and international law (Green).

The Imperial Negation

It was this western legal tradition of international law that also entailed conquest, exploitative occupations and aggressive wars that target civilians. In this modality, genocide congeals the experience of the colonizer rather than Mignolo's outsider, pointing to Lemkin's status as a white male member of the European legal elite that condoned empire while criticizing its excesses.

Lemkin drew on the long tradition of European legal and political critique of imperialism and warfare against civilians. Because genocide so often occurred in

contexts of conquest and occupation, Lemkin was naturally drawn to the jurisprudence on these questions. This jurisprudence had a long pedigree. European theologians, philosophers and lawyers have been debating the morality of foreign occupation since the Spanish conquest of the Americas in the sixteenth century. These Spanish intellectuals—above all, Bartolomé de Las Casas and Francesco de Vitoria—based their case on natural law that invested rights in Indigenous peoples. Twentieth-century jurists who defended Indigenous rights studied Vitoria carefully in making out their views. So did Lemkin, who likely knew some of them in the 1920s. Las Casas was his hero: his ‘name has lived on through the centuries as one of the most admirable and courageous crusaders for humanity the world has ever known’, wrote Lemkin (Lemkin, Folder 12). I suspect he called his book on the Nazi empire *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* in order to place it in the tradition of criticizing brutal conquests.

Genocide for Lemkin, then, was a special form of foreign conquest, occupation, and often warfare. It was necessarily imperial and colonial in nature. In particular, genocide aimed to permanently tip the demographic balance in favor of the occupier. In relation to the Nazi case, he wrote that ‘in this respect genocide is a new technique of occupation aimed at winning the peace even though the war itself is lost’ (Lemkin, *Axis Rule* 81). Any doubt that the roots of the genocide concept lie in the five-hundred-year tradition of natural law-based critique of imperialism rather than solely in Lemkin’s reaction to the Armenian genocide or Holocaust can be dispelled by his own words:

The history of genocide provides examples of the awakening of humanitarian feelings which gradually have been crystallized in formulae of international law. The awakening of the world conscience is traced to the times when the world community took an affirmative stand to protect human groups from extinction. Bartolomé de las Casas, Vitoria, and humanitarian interventions, are all links in one chain leading to the proclamation of genocide as an international crime by the United Nations. (Lemkin, ‘Proposal’)

For all that, Lemkin, like Las Casas, did not oppose colonization or empire as such. He was typical of liberals in the first half of the twentieth century like John Hobson and supporters of the League of Nations Mandate system. Empire could be supported on humanitarian grounds if it served the interests of ‘civilization’. After all, imperialism, however brutal at times, had also brought the spread of international law that Lemkin regarded as the central civilizational instrument to combat genocide. Here Lemkin the European was speaking.

Empires, humanely governed, contributed to human progress through ‘diffusion’, he implied, drawing on Malinowski. Diffusion amounted to intercultural exchange and was indentured to a theory of progress. It comprised:

gradual changes occur[ing] by means of the continuous and slow adaptation of the culture to new situations. The new situations arise from physical changes, creative energies within the culture and the impact of outside influences. Without them the culture becomes static; if they appear but are not met with adaptation of the whole culture pattern, the culture becomes less integrated. In either case, it becomes weaker and may disintegrate entirely when exposed to strong outside influences. The rise and fall of civilizations have been explained on this general basis. (Lemkin, ‘The Concept of Genocide’)

Again following Malinowski, Lemkin thought that cultural change was induced by exogenous influences, as weaker societies adopt the institutions of more efficient ones or become absorbed by them because they better fulfil basic needs. An empire that promoted diffusion governed by ‘indirect rule’, Malinowski argued, because it supposedly enabled the autonomous Indigenous acquisition of European institutions. Diffusion was a theory of cultural learning processes that justified liberal imperial rule by European powers.

How did Lemkin square this belief with his opposition to the heavy-handed assimilation of minorities he opposed in the new central European nation-states between the wars? ‘Diffusion is gradual and relatively spontaneous’, Lemkin wrote, ‘although it may lead to the eventual disintegration of a weak culture’ (Lemkin, ‘The Concept of Genocide’). The question was one of coercion. The absorption of ‘weaker’ cultures was not genocidal, although he also thought all cultural disappearances were a tragedy of sorts:

Obviously throughout history we have witnessed decline of nations and races. We will meet this phenomenon in the future too, but there is an entirely different situation when nations or races *fade away* after having *exhausted their spiritual and physical energies*, and there is a different contingency when they are murdered on the highway of world history. Dying of age or disease is a disaster but genocide is a crime. (Lemkin, ‘The Principle of Diversity’; emphasis added)

However much Lemkin expressed solidarity with minorities and, like Kant in his *Perpetual Peace*, turned the vocabulary of barbarism and civilization against Europeans, he also believed in the superiority of the West and the international law from which it developed (Kant; Muthu). His goal was to have ‘all nations of the civilized world’ criminalize genocide, a crime we know he coded as barbaric (Lemkin, *Axis Rule* xiii). In the event, this language could be used against his own

broad definition of genocide that protected the very groupness he prized. Thus the United States representative successfully argued against the inclusion of a cultural genocide provision during the UN convention deliberations by appealing to barbarism to limit genocide to its biological dimension: 'The decision to make genocide a new international crime was extremely serious, and the United States believed that the crime should be limited to barbarous acts committed against individuals, which, in the eyes of the public, constituted the basic concept of genocide' (Cooper 209).

It was no surprise that the most steadfast opponents of the cultural genocide provision were settler colonial states that wanted to assimilate their Indigenous minorities in the name of progress and modernity. In Canada, for example, Aboriginal children were taken from their families and placed into residential schools in the name of elevating them into the full humanity of white civilization—until the 1980s. These post-war regimes were blind to the genocidal dimensions and consequences of such policies because genocide was thought to resemble Nazi policies, and their own policies did not resemble the Holocaust. As human rights supplanted the Eurocentric language of civilization after World War II, it performed the same function of distinguishing between the human and the not-quite-yet human (cf. Donnelly). And before the residential schools lies the Europeans' foundational violence to gain possession of this portion of the continent, violence that was also justified in civilization's name. The human rights project narrates the past teleologically to culminate in the omniscient and morally smug humanitarian subject, but it can only extricate itself from this foundational violence and subsequent policies to 'civilize the natives' by a wilful blindness to powerful discursive continuities. The limits of the humanitarian subject's reflexivity are its implications in the genocidal moments it has perpetrated against Indigenous people.

It is true that the Canadian government apologized for the residential school catastrophe in 2008, as the Australian one did for stolen Indigenous children. Neither state apologized for genocide; they cannot apologize for their own existence. The sovereignty that enabled these policies, far from being questioned, was strengthened by arrogating to itself the ability to selectively condemn the past and incorporate Indigenous people into a redeemed national project (Moses 'Official Apologies'). As proclaimed human rights leaders, it is impossible for these states to admit their genocidal foundation. This is a genocide whose name dare not be spoken; it is a conceptual blockage and will remain concealed, impervious to the progressive narrative of genocide consciousness that participates in, rather than challenges, the enduring savagery/barbarism/civilization trichotomy.

Conclusion

Indigenous genocide is incommensurable with the humanitarian intervention agenda because the states that invented it in the nineteenth century—above all, Britain and France—were the world’s prime imperialists and founders of settler colonies that dispossessed and often exterminated Indigenous peoples. Because humanitarian intervention focusses mainly on western powers preventing or stopping genocide in other countries in the future, it screens out the violence it took (and takes) to establish these liberal democracies in the first place. The liberal discourse on human rights is predicated historically on the triumph of precisely the liberal state that is the outcome of those colonizing processes. Paradoxically, then, the structure of feeling that led to the genocide keyword—Lemkin’s status as member of persecuted people—was violated by the implications of the cluster of other keywords into which genocide was inserted.

We know Lemkin was not opposed to the spread of western civilization; he saw the field of international law that he championed as the antidote to genocide. Lemkin might well consider Indigenous people as weaker cultures who might be ‘absorbed’ by ‘cultural diffusion’. Whatever its ‘decolonial’ potential, in Mignolo’s sense of transcending Eurocentrism and inclusive modernity, the genocide keyword cannot escape its relationship to civilization. Understanding keywords, Raymond Williams concluded, would not solve the class struggle—or, in our case, end genocides—but they might add what he called an ‘extra edge of consciousness’ (*Marxism and Literature* 24), which is perhaps the best for which we can hope.

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