

THE EXCLUSIVE USE OF SPECIFIC WORDS TO DEFINE MASS VIOLENCE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE PERCEPTION OF THE PHENOMENON

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The paper presents an interdisciplinary view on the language expressoin of mass violence. The paper offers a theorectica outline of the typology of mass violence and the specificity of the terms applied to denote its different types.

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A thorough understanding of the nature of mass violence presents numerous problems arising from the linguistic use of its definitions, which do not correspond to scientific ones. Although in recent decades several interdisciplinary studies and in-depth analyses have made relevant moves toward a coherent theory and the identification of a typology of mass violence – particularly the explanation of organized “great violence” (democides, genocides, mass killings, etc.) and the individual and group behaviors that foster it – there continues to be a current use of partial definitions, which not only hinders its widespread understanding, but also very markedly influences a reduced or even distorted perception of the phenomenon.

The historical, political and social sciences have produced in recent decades a clear advancement of research on the subject of mass violence. The theory and typology of mass violence are derived from statistics and countless information gathered from reality (historical and present). In other words, theory has not been developed “in a vacuum” (historical and factual), but on the basis of empirical foundations and in constant confrontation with reality. Indeed, their results enabled:

1. A more precise definition of forms of mass violence (based on regularities found in historical investigation), which is not limited to legal definitions;
2. The identification of some of the most determinant structural causes of the phenomenon;
3. A more precise typologization (a valuable tool, this one, to guide research);
4. A consistent statistical-mathematical processing of quantitative data collected over several decades;

5. The identification of “markers” that can enable early warning and even predict, with a high degree of probability, mass violence to its extreme consequences;

6. The attempt to move from partial and local theories to a (empirically grounded) general theory.

These advances in knowledge have been followed by more precise definitions, corresponding to concepts that are more precise. These above all (in addition to quantitative and qualitative data) are fundamental and are a real compass for orientation, theoretical and practical. Indeed, they refer to real-world events that are clearly identifiable, regardless of observers and their preconceptions. Proper terminology helps not only to eliminate many misunderstandings and not to confuse different phenomena, but also to build analytical and comparative frames of reference.

Mass violence, which has reached peaks of cold planning, assumed frightening proportions in the twentieth century, but is also manifesting itself in this first half of the twenty-first century all over the world and in such brutal forms as to stimulate psychological removal, because it appears increasingly unspeakable, unacceptable and monstrous. Yet it also continues to be regarded as an object of international criminal prosecution. That is why erasure of evidence and denial have become an obsession of perpetrators, more so than in the past.

The use of current definitions, however, does not help the fight against this phenomenon. In fact, there is a prevalence of the use of the term "genocide," which downplays all others (democide, politicide, mass murder, etc.), relativizing them or even making them disappear. Instead, the reality is that genocide is only a subspecies of the more general phenomenon of “democide”, which has bloodied the twentieth century and this century. In the twentieth century alone, democide, provoked by governments, not in war, according to Rudolph J. Rummel (counting also the victims of colonialism, who were initially excluded and the Chinese democide, which includes the provoked famine, of 1958-1961), caused 262 million of massacred: that is, 6 times all the civil and interstate wars of the twentieth century. It is as if the world had been hit by a catastrophic slow-moving nuclear war. Most of the democide is attributable to governments in the countries of “real socialism” (ca. 140 million, 2/3 of the entire phenomenon in the twentieth century), the Soviet Union of Lenin, Stalin and their successors (63 million victims) and Mao’s China (nearly 70 million the most recent estimate).

Democide means the intentional killing of unarmed people, entire peoples and groups by a government or paramilitary troops affiliated with it, not in war or, if in

the course of war, not for warlike causes and in any case in violation of international conventions aimed at limiting warfare. It is “public murder”, on a large scale. As with genocide, intentionality (premeditation) is crucial. Indeed, it is characterized by cold planning: in the twentieth century it manifested itself in its icy, extreme form in planning for “quotas” of randomly selected citizens to be eliminated, understood as a political-bureaucratic task to be carried out to meet a plan (so as to reach a percentage quota of the population to be eliminated, for whatever reason).

“Democide” means the physical elimination of an unarmed, defenseless or non-combatant people by those in power (and their aides). The theory of democide represents an extension of that relating to the subspecies of extermination caused by mass violence, in that it incorporates, in their overlapping and intersecting, genocide, politicide and almost the entire typology of mass murders (atrocities, massacres), insufficient to describe the entire casuistry of planned and intentional massacres. It includes them all and incorporates what those exclude, as long as the killing is an act, policy, process or institutional, governmental act.

Democide is an innovative concept (and at the same time a theory) of considerable magnitude, as it has also been shown to be able to explain all those phenomena that previous classifications were unable to categorize and explain. Especially that of genocides: unlike the concept of genocide, it is in fact limited to intentional killing and does not extend to attempts to eliminate cultures, races or a people by means other than killing people. Moreover, it is of paramount importance because it describes the complexity of a phenomenon of tremendous proportions. Most of the detectable cases of democide in the twentieth century were the direct and flagrant responsibility of governments. In many countries, democide was an integral part of the policy of the governments that ruled them and the result of deliberate public policy.

Mass media and lawyers, however, continue to consider as an extreme and often exclusive form of mass violence only genocide, which is a minimal part of the much larger democide.

Genocide is the deliberate (intentional, specific) and systematic (planned) physical elimination, in whole or in part, of ethnic (cultural, linguistic) and national and/or religious groups. The ultimate intent is to extirpate from humankind a group deemed “not worthy of existence” and all its members. It is an attempt by a political power group to violently decimate, with the aim of driving it to extinction, a minority and vulnerable group (of the helpless) whose integration into the model of society that another hegemonic minority intends to assert is deemed impossible or harmful.

Genocide is the extreme form of ethnic cleansing. The certainty of impunity is an incentive to genocidal practice.

However, genocide does not include other extreme forms of mass violence, which can be the size of tens of millions of people murdered. For example, genocide does not cover mass killing: an extreme subspecies of mass violence, which includes intentional killings of large numbers of civilians (and noncombatants, in war), by holders of (stable or temporary) power. They are usually preceded by generic violence (expulsions, deportations, segregations, etc.). Its fundamental component is non-accidentality, regardless of the grounds on which it is justified or the objectives it is intended to achieve. Such massacres are the direct or indirect result of political actions (e.g., forced collectivization, territorial conquests, etc.) and depend on political intentions and decisions. Their characteristics are evaluated according to intentionality, their occurrence, who prepares and orders the violence, intensity, and results.

There is, however, a substantial portion of these massacres that are not intentional, planned and premeditated in nature, but are the result of indiscriminate and extemporaneous killing of unarmed masses (e.g., opening fire on peaceful demonstrations, killing prisoners while retreating in the face of an enemy's pressing threat, or killing all villagers without specific warlike reasons, as in the case of My Lai in Vietnam, etc.) They are the unintended consequence of a set of political actions whose initial purpose was different from the outcome (e.g., the slaughter of innocent civilians in war, etc.). This aspect differentiates them from both genocides and democides, from the typology of which they partially escape.

Then there are “politicides”: forms of mass extermination conducted by those in power to enforce specific policies and/or to physically eliminate dissent. This type does not fall under genocides but is part of democides and in the twentieth century alone was responsible for the physical elimination of tens of millions of people.

So, the concept of genocide cannot be used to identify any mass “great massacre”, because it is the product of a conception that is too limited, insufficient to define all large-scale mass killings that exceed the “ethno-national” motivations referring to the groups to which one belongs by birth, which could be defined as “indelible” groups. In some cases, in fact, it has been possible to utilize the term genocide only to classify a minimal part of a democide actually carried out (e.g., the Cambodian genocide, recognizable only in the parts referable to the extermination of a few national and religious minorities-Vietnamese, Cham, Thai, Lao, Kola, and Buddhist-and not entire masses of the people eliminated).

Or they used the nonsensical definition of “autogenocide” for this historical case, due to the fact that the notion of democide, which continues to be ignored, was still missing. After all, Raphael Lemkin himself, the father of the term and concept of genocide, a native of Lviv like Hersch Lauterpacht, a scholar of the same legal problem, gave a much broader definition than the one later accepted by the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide.

The legal definition of the phenomenon is inadequate for historical-empirical investigation and also risks making international law inapplicable. Indeed, acts committed with the intent to annihilate political, ideological, economic, military, professional or other groups cannot be classified as genocide. Genocide does not include the intent to destroy “non-indelible groups”, political, economic, professional, etc. (as is the case in the much broader democide).

The problem is that most of the mass killings perpetrated by governments were directed precisely at annihilating such groups and not at war. These were evidently “public” murders, and intentionality was inherent in the act itself. It was therefore necessary to identify new concepts and a more general theory, especially for those mass slaughters of enormous proportions (a million or more people eliminated), caused by those countless governments in the twentieth century that turned their states into concentration camps, let millions of their citizens starve to death, used terrorist famines responsible for tens of millions of deaths, and even set “quotas” of those who were to be killed, in order to achieve internal homogeneity.

Terrorist famines provoked and used as a weapon (USSR, China, Mozambique, North Korea, Ethiopia, Cambodia, etc.), are part of democide, but more specifically some of these can also be classified as genocide (e.g., the Ukrainian Holodomor of 1932-33, as recognized by numerous specialists, the cause of 4-6 million starvation deaths), as they contain the component of fighting against a national group, at that time reluctant to submit. These are mass killings resulting from deliberate government policies.

The current and official use of the word “genocide” (e.g., by the lawyers), actually influences widespread ideas about mass violence by reducing its seriousness to only this subspecies of democides. The exclusive use of the term genocide is a performative linguistic act, a performative utterance that shapes reality by creating a partial one, as it leads one to believe that if genocide is not present, all other types of mass violence are either not present or are irrelevant or even nonexistent. Indeed, we are faced with a case in which the use of words succeeds in creating a one-sided reality that excludes other similar phenomena, which may also be much more widespread, numerous and severe in quantitative terms. Moreover, the official and

limiting use of the term genocide, by not matching the reality of a much broader phenomenon such as democides and mass violence, also reduces the possibility of prosecuting much broader and more different crimes against humanity as excluded from the definition. Genocide is a very specific term, and its use as a synonym for insuperable crimes has led to its misuse. It should be kept in mind that millions of people continue to live in countries ruled by regimes that have been and are inherently inclined to perpetrate democides. Only the forms, places, times, technical efficiency, institutional framework, and legitimizing purpose change.