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Genocide Instinctive Group Violence and Hominid Mass Killing: Toward a Biohumanistic Historical Perspective

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Opinion

Current genocide scholarship is an interdisciplinary field constituted largely within the humanities and social sciences. It does not commonly address evidence from physical anthropology, archaeology and zoology. Such evidence suggests that collective forms of mass killing may be a constant (albeit rare) potential, not only of humans, but of primates of high intelligence and complex social structure, posing questions about its relationship to violent instinct and to group cohesion through othering. These lines of inquiry are generally avoided by genocide scholars in view of their association with debunked universalist paradigms that infused many of the early attempts to theorize a social psychology of mass violence. But there is now the potential to move beyond such faulty conceptions through a more integrated bio-psycho-social view of genocide potential as a constant of hominid life.

Social theory of the Holocaust in particular, was initially strongly influenced by universalist habits of thought derived from pre-World-War-Two paradigms of civilizational teleology and psychiatric ideas about mass violence as the expression of sexual psychopathology. Because genocide was associated with an imagined social evolutionary past, it was seen as something constantly hovering in human potential, always a risk, timelessly lurking behind the civilized self of each individual [1]. That idea was made explicit in Sigmund Freud's later psychoanalytic works, particularly in the 1929 text, *Das Unbehagen* in *der Kultur* (*Civilization and Its Discontents*) in which the libido was described as divided between distinct erotic and death instincts [2].

Freud's view of barbarous violent instincts that modern society barely managed to repress was highly influential in emergent social theories of violence around the time of Second World War. The Frankfurt School social philosophers Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimerand Erich Fromm drew correlations between Nazism and sadistic sexual perversion [3,4]. The notion that individual psychology might explain the behaviour of collectives was an important assumption of psychoanalytic thought which allowed for the application of concepts such as ego, repression, the sexual foundation of the psyche and neurosis, into meta-theoretical discourse about Nazism and modernity. In the Frankfurt School model this collective extended to even the most sophisticated intellectual elites of society - now it was Enlightenment philosophy itself that gave rise to both perversion (as typified by the Marquis de Sade) and as expressed in the Holocaust [5]. In the work of the more recent sociologist Zygmunt Baumann, this teleology is reversed and it is civilization itself that produces genocidal killing as the culmination of its own rationalistic tendencies [6].

Genocide studies are now a deeply interdisciplinary field of inquiry that includes historians, anthropologists, social psychologists, sociologists, political theorists, legal scholars and philosophers. As result of these interdisciplinary conversations, ideas about the causes of genocide have made important departures from the assumptions which infused such inquiries before the nineteen-eighties. Overwhelmingly, recent scholarship has dismissed questions of instinct and transhistorical potential, focusing instead on particular contexts in which changing

social relations and historical precedents have resulted in the persecution of those deemed 'outside' the nation or viewed as diseased elements infecting the social body Hinton & Roth [7]. Importantly, social psychologists and sociologists such as Erwin Straub, Kristen Renwick Monroe & Wolfgang Sofsky [8-10] have also emphasized the progressive conditioning both of individual perpetrators and complicit social collectives toward acceptance of the violent persecution of out-groups.

Comparative historical analyses have supported such a view of genocide in relation to historical precedents, with scholars such as Dirk Moses and Donald Bloxham emphasizing a process of pre-conditioning toward the violent disposal of populations which European states developed in earlier colonial dominations of the peoples they first deemed less than fully human throughout early modern history [11]. Mass killings by Portuguese and Spanish colonists in the 16th and 17th centuries are well documented. Scholars such as David Stannard and Russel Thornton have suggested the evident population decline in the Americas by as much as 80% from initial European conquest until 1900 was produced at least in part by various genocidal practices, not counting the indirect effects of the spread of disease [12,13]. The connection between colonialism and genocide appears credible too in light of the historical record of European colonial powers committing mass killings of particular groups throughout Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, even after the World War Two - such as the British killing of Mau Mau rebels in Kenya in the 1950s [14]. Saliently, the German empire, 20-30 years before the rise of virulent anti-Semitic discourse during the Weimar years in Germany, had enacted a deliberate attempt to annihilate the entire Herrero and Namaqua peoples in south-west Africa, which included the enslavement of women and children in concentration camps and use of medical experiments on indigenous prisoners - all features of their later, more famous, system of the genocide of Jews, Roma and other minorities during World War Two [15].

Less commonly noted within genocide scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, there is another form of research in the field of physical and forensic anthropology that potentially casts doubt on even the best theories about the modern particularity of human behaviours in which discrete groups of humans are targeted for annihilation. One such body of research described by Debra Komar, an anthropologist at the University of New Mexico, has emerged from the involvement of forensic anthropologists in the recovery of bodies from mass graves in Bosnia Herzogovina, in which a consistent set of "distinctive mortuary practices" have been identified in genocide perpetrator disposal of victims, which contrasts strikingly to those practices used in the burial of one's own people, or of third-party (neutral) populations [16]. In short, the perpetrator-made graves tend to be shallower, with bodies casually dumped and erratically positioned, body-parts separated, and different corpses comingled, in contrast to the self- and neutral-graves in which bodies are buried carefully, are often shrouded or encased or otherwise venerated, or at the very least purposefully arranged with an attempt to maintain the integrity of each individual's body. The distinctive characteristics of perpetrator mortuary practices have been noted by archaeologists in a number of premodern mass graves sites, such as at a site in Towton in North Yorkshire where the houses of York and Lancaster fought one another in 1461; and at a burial site at the Crow Creek Sioux Reservation in South Dakota dated around 1325. In both these locations, characteristic perpetrator-built graves have been identified containing undifferentiated remains of men of all ages, women and children. More recently, an even earlier similar mass grave containing both adult and child skeletons that had been systematically disfigured was identified by German archaeologists near Frankfurt dating from around 7000 years ago [17].Might forms of targeted killing of entire groups of people then predate the rise of modern states and colonial empires? It seems likely.

Another field of inquiry into non-human hominid species has raised the possibility of even older practices of entire-group massacre. In 2003 an Australian physical anthropologist at the University of New England, Peter Brown designated a newly discovered hominid species from the unearthing of multiple individuals' remains in the cave of Liang Bua on the Balinese island of Flores [18]. The new species *Homo floresiensis,* nicknamed "the Hobbit" because of its diminutive size, has been the subject of fierce debate among physical anthropologists ever since this discovery, but is widely accepted as a small-stature advanced hominid with a relatively large brain for its height and mass, believed to have inhabited the island from 95,000 years ago until as recently as 13,000 years ago. A volcano about 12, 000 years ago may have been the cause of their demise, shortly after which *Homo sapiens* are thought to have arrived on the island [19]. However, some curious oral history reported by the current inhabitants of Flores to cultural anthropologists tell of a massacre perpetrated by their ancestors of a miniature human-like creature who was hairy and smelly, ate anything, stole their crops, and who the humans finally rounded up in a cave and burnt alive [20]. Research on early *Homo sapiens* migrations into the European continent has likewise suggested that one possible cause of the massive decline in other hominid species between 2 million and 40,000 years ago, in which the extinction of, most famously, the Neanderthals occurred, may have entailed deliberate killing of entire local populations by tribes of Homo sapiens, who thus emerged victorious as the only surviving hominid [21]. Might genocidal killing be not only pre-modern but indeed even prehistoric?

Zoologists have suggested that our assumption of genocidal killing as a particularly human behaviour may also be unfounded. In the nineteen-seventies Jane Goodall described a four-year long conflict between neighbouring Chimpanzee tribes in the Gombe Stream National Park in Tanzania, in which one group

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conducted a planned extermination of the opposing group, successfully annihilating them almost entirely in order to claim their territory and food resources [22]. The science writer Dale Peterson extended the significance of this data even further, suggesting that both chimpanzees and humans shared a genetic predisposition toward male coalitionary mass killing [23]. There are then two trends in current thinking about genocide that might appear to contradict one another - on the one hand histories of colonial genocides that locate such practices in distinctively modern forms of power and state systems, and on the other hand, physical anthropology and zoology of mass killing suggesting it as something that primates, including hominids,can do even at the most simple levels of social organisation, without the formation of state systems and complex ideologies such as those commonly cited in historical and anthropological causation.

The contemporary field of genocide studies has been constituted through a reorientation toward strongly empirical analysis of particular contexts and an avoidance of transhistoric claims. This paper has suggested several examples of prehistoric and non-human primate mass killing that are not commonly been discussed by such scholars. These examples need not discredit the particularist historical and anthropological causation suggested by genocide historians and social scientists but can be accommodated into a holistic theory of genocide potential as hominid constant. Genocide is clearly not the norm either of human societies, or of other intelligent primates, but its sporadic recurrence in even the most distant past and non-human primates indicates a need to think beyond purely humanistic and social explanation. That need is ever pressing as new forms of violent hatred of outgroups have emerged in even the most stable democracies worldwide, and as the incarceration of entire groups of men, women and children as refugees or as illegal immigrants, such as the Rohingya in Myanmar, continues despite humanitarian assertions.

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