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TEACHING ABOUT GENOCIDE: TWO VIEWS

CHOICES, ASSUMPTIONS AND FRAMEWORKS: A Response to Porter

by **Helen Fein**,
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Although the study of genocide has expanded in the nineties, few sociologists teach courses on genocide. Many reasons have been adduced for this: sociology's inability or unwillingness to consider "unique" events (as Kai Ericson and Jack Porter have noted), the time consumed in intellectual preparation, the lack of professional rewards, the need to rethink --or experience for the first time-- how to handle passion and dispassion, engagement and objectivity, and in the past, sociologists' bias against themes seen as implying particularist or Jewish identification. Yet there is growing awareness among sociologists and others in the last five year --perhaps as a result of genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda-- of the need for more understanding not only of genocide but of our failure to prevent it despite ample warnings and high visibility.

In a recent edition of this Newsletter (Vol. 9, No. 3), Jack Porter presented

a concise prescription for how teachers should approach teaching about genocide, focussing on the Holocaust. My approach differs on the prescriptions.¹ Both approaches can be related to intellectual and personal background² and both embody certain moral commitments.

Because of the gap in understanding the concept of genocide even among teachers teaching courses on the Holocaust, the Institute for the Study of Genocide organized a conference (with Facing History and Ourselves) in Brookline in 1991 to consider issues and experiences: these included the uniqueness and universality of the Holocaust, presuppositions and issues, moral education, and teaching about genocide in an age of genocide. From that forum, Joyce Freedman Apse and I compiled a handbook on teaching about genocide.³ The courses (in departments of anthropology, history, sociology, literature, psychology) include those of ordinary teachers as well as of prominent scholars (e.g., Leo Kuper, Ervin Staub, Richard Hovannisian, Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn). What is remarkable about these syllabi is their diversity in focus --some concentrate on the Holocaust, others undertake comparisons-- and in emphasis -- "the politics of genocide".. "government repression and democide", "kindness and cruelty", "the psychology of good and evil."

This implies that there is a wide range of choices that must be made by teachers. These would appear to be determined not only by their intellectual grounding and personal background but by the time available for the course and the setting in which it takes place. If you focussed primarily on the Holocaust, I strongly suspect you would teach a course differently depending on whether you were in Berlin, Brooklyn, Brookline or Berkeley.

Because of the centrality of Germany in western civilization and Christianity --not to speak of the prominence of German sociologists in social theories which have been related to genocid -- it is likely that the Holocaust will continue to be the focus of most courses on genocide in North America. However many scholars talk of "uniqueness" --I believe singularity is more apt-- "uniqueness" does not settle any questions (rather it obscures and mystifies them) and there are critical differences among scholars as to what is unique about the Holocaust.

To make sense of the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question", it has to be put in context. Several are dominant: 1) the history of antisemitism, 2) the history of Germany; and 3) the rise of the criminal state. The first asks, "Why the Jews?"; the second asks "Why the Germans?"; and third how a state with the will and capacity to murder a group or class of its citizens emerged.

Genocide was the Nazi locomotive of history --the engine of social change.⁴ We have often failed to see it as a whole because we focus on trains of boxed victims, viewing it from a victim-centered perspective rather than viewing the process as a whole. The fulfillment of the "Final Solution" --the destruction of the Jews-- differed from other genocides in several important respects as did that of the Gypsies, the only other group which the Germans aimed to destroy entirely. The Final Solution was the first and only transnational genocide; its aim was total annihilation, and it was singular in its scope, length, and area. It is among several genocides that are a function of ideology; these include the Armenian genocide (1915) and

the Cambodian genocide (1975-79). Most genocides in the post-World War II era are retributive genocides --to eliminate a real or potential threat to power by a dominant ethnoclass or group-- as in Bosnia and Rwanda.

To detect genocides, we can not use the Holocaust as a mechanical model, template, apogee, or "touchstone," because of the singularity of the Holocaust (the labeling of which as a metaphorical sacrifice has led to more confusion). To classify events, as some commentators do, by whether they are or are not a Holocaust is like measuring viral fevers with a thermometer which only has markings of 96 and 106 degrees. Further, no one appreciated the magnitude of the Holocaust until it was over--perhaps because it was over--so the problem of recognizing genocide-in-the-making is different from comparisons of past events.

Robert Melson, who has presented a rich and thick comparison of the preconditions, origin, and functions of the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide,⁵ asserted that both the genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia are better understood by comparison with the genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire rather than the Holocaust: an ethnionational community envisioning a state based on exclusive national solidarity, leading to "ethnic cleansing" of minorities in their midst. Thus, no single genocide is a paradigm for all others [...].

What is common among genocides besides the will of the perpetrator to eliminate a significant part of a people and the organization of that will, is the exclusion of the Other from the universe of obligation (see, *Accounting for Genocide*, Chp. 1). States basing their *raison d'etre* on likeness or ethnic homogeneity have an intrinsic motive and doctrine to exclude others. Such exclusion prefaces the rationale for expelling and destroying them. A crisis or opportunity often precipitates the rationale for genocide. The calculus of genocide still depends on the fact that the perpetrator counts on bystander states not intervening; this is a key to prevention.

Differences among scholars will continue to arise from definition, not only because of the intrinsic difficulties of demarcating a "fuzzy" concept, but because some believe that to designate an atrocity as a war crime, crime against humanity, or gross violation of human rights or a massacre or pogrom rather than as a genocide is to deprecate the atrocity. Slavery is a case in point --certainly a crime against humanity, conceived of as an evil in its time, but not an attempt to annihilate a group. We must be clear that comparative history is not the same as the comparative politics of victimization. Definition should not serve as moral ranking of crimes.

Porter says that "To make everything genocide is to make nothing genocide." I agree. More problematic is Porter's statement that "to overlook the uniqueness of the Holocaust is also a form of Holocaust denial, although a very subtle form." This is mischievous by confounding differences of conceptualization or opinion and genuine bad faith and ideological propaganda. One has to look at cases and discriminate intent and truth value.' To call critics deniers diminishes the onus of the organized deniers of both the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust; in the former case, such deniers are bent on absolving Turks from culpability, and in the latter on reviving the respectability of antisemitism as a political force.

Lastly, I agree with Porter that while there are critical controversies which should not be obscured, respect and civility are essential for academic debate and hope this discussion will go on in such a spirit. As the uses of genocide evolve, our understanding must also evolve.

Endnotes

1. A useful but jarring and uncivil exploration of this is Alan Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique?* Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996. See especially the forewords by Rosenbaum and Chamy.
2. In my case, this began with *Accounting for Genocide: National Responses and Jewish Victimization During the Holocaust* (winner of the 1979 Sorokin Award of the American Sociological Association "for a brilliantly original interpretation of a complex and singular historical process that until now has defined comprehensive social analysis."). This also related the Holocaust to the Armenian genocide and viewed the Gypsies as victims of Nazi genocide. Since then, I began to look at how the modern state-system responds to genocide (mostly with dismayingly indifference and in many cases with great powers as accomplices), relate the incidence of contemporary genocides to war, ethnic stratification, and polity types (in a project funded by the SSRC MacArthur Foundation), link genocides to a scale of violation of life-integrity, and relate theory to prevention (references available on request).
3. Joyce Freedman Apsel and Helen Fein eds., *Teaching About Genocide: A Guidebook for College and University Teachers--Critical Essays, Syllabi and Assignments*. Ottawa: Human Rights Internet, 1992. The volume is available from the ASA Teaching Resource Center.
4. On this, see, for example Henry Friedlander, *The Origin of Nazi Genocide*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.
5. Robert Melson, *Revolution and genocide .- on the origins of the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust* With a foreword by Leo Kuper. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
6. A useful but jarring and uncivil exploration of this is Alan Rosenbaum, ed, *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996. See especially the forewords by Rosenbaum and Charny.

THE HOLOCAUST AS UNIQUE: A Rejoinder to Fein

by **Jack Nusan Porter**,
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In my previous article in the Newsletter (Vol. 9, No. 3), I made three distinct and inter-related statements. The first was that "to make everything genocide is to make nothing genocide." This seems to me to be obvious. In our politically-correct times, people label anything and everything "genocide" because it gets attention. I do it, too. I've used the term "gay genocide" because it sounds slick and smooth even though I know that homosexuals and lesbians were not targets of genocide in Nazi

Germany. I use the phrase "Black holocaust" as well for similar reasons. It is a sort of short-hand; it is easier than a hefty and complex explanation. But it is still incorrect.

The second statement I made was that the Holocaust was unique among genocides. When something is unique, it is unique -- not partially unique, but completely unique. It is a little like being pregnant. Either you are pregnant or you are not. The Holocaust, with a capital "H" is and was unique among genocides. Roget's College Thesaurus defines unique as being "sui generis, singular, unequaled, matchless, unparalleled, unprecedented, and rare." While the Holocaust is comparable, meaning it can be compared to other genocides, it stands out as the most sophisticated, most complex, and most gargantuan genocide in history in terms of its ideology, bureaucracy, technology, and industrialized killing. What other genocide grabs our imagination even sixty years later? However, because the word "Holocaust" has been so over-used, people are searching for new terms, new concepts that are harder to co-opt, such as "Shoah." Saying that the Shoah is unique does not in my eyes minimize any other genocide. It is only a measuring stick to gauge the others. There is no moral one-up-manship implied.

The third statement I made was the most controversial: "to overlook the uniqueness of the Holocaust is also a form of Holocaust denial." That was perhaps too bald and too simple a statement. I agree with Helen Fein that there is "real" Holocaust denial, and I do not want to imply that any criticism of the Shoah is a form of denial. There is "revisionism" and "revisionist thinking." One is indeed bad faith, ideological propaganda and racist anti-Semitism. To deny that there was a Shoah is mental illness. However, there has emerged a new form of "denial" some of which surfaced in the recent volume edited by Alan Rosenbaum and especially in the work of Stannard.¹ I have also seen it at work at Harvard and other campuses. For example, at the University of Washington, a student-faculty task force on ethnicity denied Jews, Italians, and Irish-Americans certification as "ethnic groups." Status as an oppressed ethnic group is guarded even more jealously. The Washington task force also decided that a required ethnic-studies program exploring racism in America would not take up the subject of anti-Semitism. The reason, Commentary quoted Professor Johnella Butler as having said, was that "anti-Semitism is not institutionalized in this Country."²

This is a huge topic, but I do occasionally see professors and students a bit fed up with the Jews, fed up with the special pleading of Jews, the special treatment of the Shoah on TV, in the movies, and in other media, as if there were only one genocide --the Jewish one. Therefore, when I say that the Shoah is unique, people take that to mean "special", "more important", "more significant" than other genocides. It echoes the "chosen people" concept in Judaism; that Jews are a chosen people, meaning better, special people. What I really mean is that Jews have a special burden, a special and unique responsibility for righteousness and tzedakah. But people mis-interpret the concept. The same thing holds when I say that the Shoah is unique. It is true that some scholars have taken this too far; for example, in his book *The Holocaust in Historical Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Prof. Steven Katz, chair of the Jewish studies department at Boston University, blatantly andchutzpaically asserts that the Holocaust was the only real genocide! This is

totally false; however, Katz makes important criticisms of long-assumed truths regarding the Armenian, Gypsy, and gay genocides, as well as of Native Americans, Afro-Americans, women, and witches as examples of genocide. He should be listened to. He may be wrong in his over-arching supposition but not in many of the details.

Which leads to the last thing I want to address: civility. Both Helen Fein and I agree that there has been a lack of civility and an increase in ad hominem attacks on scholars recently. (For example, over the Goldhagen and Katz books). We must once again re-read Thomas Kuhn: science and sociology only grow when new paradigms emerge to confront the old idols; out of this conflict emerge new paradigms, new idols, and new syntheses. We may not like to be shaken up out of our stupor, but it is healthy. I try to do it all the time: shake and be shaken. It is good for you.

Notes

1. Alan Rosenbaum, ed, *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996.
2. See John Taylor, "Are You Politically Correct" in Jo Ray McCuen And Anthony C. Winkler, eds., *Readings for Writers*, 8th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), pp. 31-55.

