

## **SOCIAL INTENT AND THE THREAT OF GENOCIDE: TOWARD A GENERAL THEORY OF VIOLENCE**

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Among the pressing needs of current social science is the development of a theory of violence, including models of its most heinous forms such as genocide. The more fully that cycles and processes of violence can be understood, the greater the likelihood that effective steps toward prevention and/or mitigation can be taken. Genocide is likely to provide a particularly important focus, not only in its own right, but also inasmuch as its extremal nature can cast the general dynamics of violence into dramatic relief.

The most coherent defining properties of genocide are: 1) actions that cause mass death, and 2) the one-sided targeting of a defenseless, non-threatening target (Sallach 1999). The roles of collective actors are less definitive. State agents tend to be, but are not always, the perpetrator. Ascriptive minorities are common targets, but criteria blur; sometimes target groups are defined only by the perpetrator (Chalk & Jonassohn 1990).

A fifth criterion, the *intent* to commit genocide, comprises a strong, if somewhat ambiguous property. As for many other crimes, the case is stronger if intent is explicit. Intent can also be inferred, however, and frequently inferred intent is quite compelling.

In general, social intent is complex and fluid, and a theory of violent action must address this fluidity. In particular, many participants who actively enable genocide may not have conscious genocidal intent. Their scale of attention and planning is more local and circumspect. Some may contemplate local killing(s) only, others may (try to) ignore the consequences of their actions in support of predatory social actors.

It has previously been suggested (Sallach 1999) that a highly diverse set of motives contribute to genocidal outcomes, including: fear, status defense &/or enhancement, revenge, conformity with prevailing sentiment, material gain, in-group solidarity and the accumulation of power. Some of these motives (e.g., fear, conformity) make killing and its enablement a secondary goal, subservient to a stronger or more immediate motive. It is the interaction among longer-term intent clusters that allow the emergence of genocide as a macro phenomenon. Accordingly, recognizing the incipient threat of genocide involves identifying the emergence of ominous threat structures. Such patterns may also provide a basis for computation models of genocide threat assessment.

Comparable intent patterns may generalize to threats of war, terrorist campaigns, civil conflicts and other forms of organized violence, thereby addressing some of the most pressing issues in collective security studies. Success in this endeavor thus has the potential to place the prevention of violence on the contemporary policy agenda.

### References

- Chalk, Frank & Kurt Jonassohn. 1990. *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analysis and Case Studies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sallach, David L. 1999. Modeling genocide: Complexity and criticality. Presentation to the Association of Genocide Scholars, Madison, Wisconsin.