Situating Genocide within the Context of Other Forms of Large-Scale Political Violence

[short essay in book by Samuel Totten on *Teaching about Genocide*, in chapter tentatively titled: “Best Advice from Professors and Secondary Level Teachers Who Have Taught Courses on Genocide.”]

Undergraduate students have a tendency to see genocide or targeted political mass killing (politicide) as unique cases of seemingly irrational events that defy systematic explanation – cases of “age old hatreds” perpetrated by “crazy evildoers” that could not happen elsewhere.

Increasingly, my attempts to teach my students about genocide and politicide have tried to address these issues. As a result, I have moved in my current course\(^1\) to situating genocide and politicide within the context of other forms of large-scale political violence. Doing so helps students see these atrocities as rational, if horrific, policy choices. It helps them see these atrocities as processes that unfold with particular dynamics, and with some regularity across cases, rather than as discrete and wholly unique events. It helps them see how violence, hatred, and fear build within societies and regimes, and how other types of mobilization and violence serve as triggers or covariates of genocide or politicide.

I usually start by steeping my students in a particular case of genocide. This takes the form of a common reading that they do *before* the semester begins. My most recent go-to text has been Philip Gourevitch’s excellent journalistic investigation *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow*

\(^1\) The syllabus for the course, *Large-Scale Political Violence*, is located on my webpage, at:

*http://discover.wooster.edu/mkrain/psci247/*
We Will Be Killed with Our Families; Stories from Rwanda. This gives all students a common starting knowledge base, but also allows us to unpack the case and the multiple forms of political violence that unfold in Gourevitch’s account as we progress throughout the semester. On day one of class I solicit reactions from students, ask them how they might begin to wrap their heads around the atrocities, but also ask them to identify other forms of political violence in the book, and how they might be related to the genocide. We connect the ongoing civil war, the assassination of the president, the revolution in neighboring Zaire, the targeted violence in the refugee camps, the use of sexual violence throughout the case, the manipulation of identity and other uses of framing to foment ethnic conflict, and many other themes that we will delve deeper into later. We then situate the case within three key questions that animate the political violence literature: why do people mobilize, why do they use violence when they do, and what is the role of the state? These questions frame our conversation throughout the semester.

Along the way we examine the motivations of numerous types of actors, ranging from the state and state-contracted non-state actors (paramilitaries, death squads, etc.), rebel groups or other non-state actors who may or may not pose threats to the regime, international actors who do or do not intervene, and even why ordinary individuals might be able to be transformed into perpetrators of evil. Here the work in social psychology is essential, especially Herbert Kelman’s remarkable 1973 essay in the Journal of Social Issues on how authorization, routinization, and dehumanization make atrocities possible.

Throughout our course journey, we examine a variety of forms of political violence, first by people or groups in society, then later in the semester violence by the state. In each case, whether
it is trying to understand coups or civil wars, massacres or terrorism, state repression or death squads, sexual violence, torture, or slavery, we constantly ask key questions designed to help them understand particular cases of interest, but also to be able to analyze other cases like those. Together in each class session we ask a series of questions designed to get us to understand the phenomenon in a more systematic fashion:

- What is this type of violence (conceptualization)?
- How would we know it if we saw it (operationalization)?
- What causes or precipitates this form of political violence (onset)?
- How does it play out over space and time (dynamics)?
- Who are the actors involved or affected? Who participates, and why (actors)?
- What mitigates/ends this form of political violence once it has begun (termination)?
- What happens as a result of this form of political violence (consequences)?

As we move through different forms of political violence examined theoretically and within the context of a range of specific cases, we are constantly comparing what we are observing in our readings and research to previous types of violence that we have studied, and other cases we have examined, including the Rwanda case.

By the time we have examined when and why people or groups use violence, how rationality, structure and identity affect the likely use of violence, how fear and perception of threat, power and resources affect the likelihood of insurgencies, or terrorism, or massacres by rebels, students have the tools they need to ask questions about contemporary genocidal massacres by groups
such as ISIS/Daesh. Once we have seen how and why states move from restrictive repression to personal integrity violations, how they convince or coerce other members of society to participate or look away when using torture, or sexual violence, or massacres, it becomes easier for students to see the twisted logic of genocide, to understand whom the state is likely to target, why and how, and to more fully comprehend not just what happened in Rwanda, but how and why. They can also see more clearly in other cases, including in ongoing ones such as contemporary Syria (or in ones that fall short of genocide, such as in Burundi – at least as of this writing), the rhetoric, the dehumanization, and the other forms of political violence that seem to co-vary with, cause, or trigger genocide or politicide.

In sum, teaching genocide and politicide in the context of other forms of large-scale political violence gets students to situate cases within a larger framework, and to think systematically about the preconditions, causes, dynamics, termination, and consequences of these atrocities. My experience suggests that this makes for students who both better understand these phenomena as horrific but understandable and often predictable atrocities, often made up of numerous other forms of political violence each of which contribute to the onset or evolution of the genocide or politicide. This approach sparks student interest in investigating how to prevent, avert, mitigate, or end ongoing or future genocides or politicides. And it makes for students who can see causal complexity in the world around them, and arms them with the knowledge to be able to sound the alarm if and when the next atrocity arises.