global-e

Naming Genocide: The Least That Can Be Done

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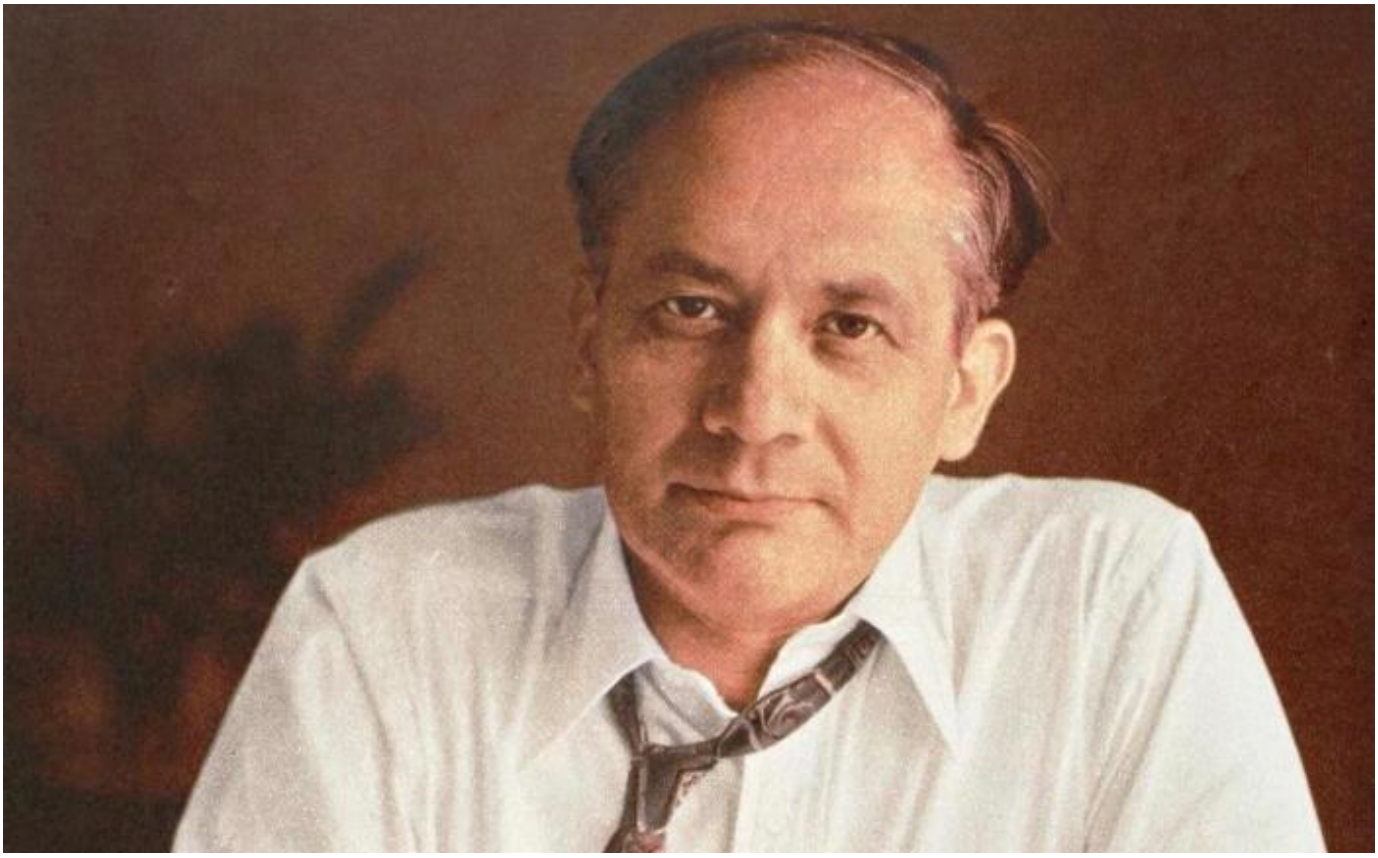
There is a troubling tendency among some academics and commentators to dismiss too easily the use of the word genocide in the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar. To apply the term to this complex conflict, they suggest, is too simplistic, an exaggerated activist shock tactic designed to get publicity rather than a serious tool of description or analysis. The general concern is surely an important one: that the invocation of genocide—and the inevitable politics of doing so—can overshadow a layered and multifaceted historical and contemporary complexity that cannot be grasped or contained by simplistic categorizations. Yet the concept of genocide is more complex, nuanced, and indeed broader than many tend to recognize. Seen in this context, the disavowal of its relevance reveals an unnecessarily rigid doctrinal mind-set (with quite significant implications). Moreover, some argue that the word should be reserved for a few cases which display a 'special evil', used sparingly because the phenomenon itself is an exceptionally rare occurrence. But this is assumption rather than argument—there is simply no logical *a priori* reason why genocide should apply to only a few situations.[1]

Engagement with the concept's history makes it clear that such dismissals are only intellectually sustainable on the basis of a highly selective understanding, problematic blind spots, and unacknowledged biases. The term genocide was coined by the Polish international lawyer Raphael Lemkin in 1943, although his scholarship was for decades strangely absent from the academic field of genocide studies. However, both popular and official understandings of the concept today, which usually rely on the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide, have departed in significant ways from Lemkin's original formulation. In contrast to conventional understandings of genocide as systematic, planned, and ideologically-driven mass killing, Lemkin saw it as a complex, multifaceted process which incorporated broad-based cultural and social destruction as an integral aspect, and did not necessarily involve mass killings.

For him, the element of cultural destruction was absolutely central to the overall concept of genocide. Genocidal techniques for Lemkin aimed to 'cripple' groups by targeted all aspects underpinning collective life, including political institutions, economic existence, language, religion, health and even the 'dignity' of groups.[2] Indeed, the politicized removal of an entire section on 'cultural genocide' from the UN Convention during the drafting process (a process with which Lemkin was intimately involved) was strongly resisted by him, and as he wrote in his autobiography, ultimately a cause of much personal distress. He was also deeply interested in many cases of colonial genocides, and saw genocide in general as a process that was underpinned by an inherently colonial logic—a neglected insight with quite profound implications for our interpretation of the meaning of genocide historically and in the contemporary world. For example, in *Axis Rule,* he wrote:

> Genocide has two phases: one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor. This imposition, in turn, may be made upon the oppressed population which is allowed to remain or upon the territory alone, after removal of the population and the colonization by the oppressor's own nationals.[3]

But Lemkin was politically pragmatic, with a deep liberal faith in the law, and accepted the definitional compromise. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the consequence has been a legacy of misunderstanding.[4]



Raphael Limkin

Compounding this lost intellectual lineage, a pervasive Holocaust-centrism in subsequent decades has led to restrictive interpretations of the meaning and scope of genocide, with the labeling of situations as ‘genocide’ being reserved for a few big or ‘spectacular’ cases of (usually one-sided) mass killing, which are largely ‘successful’ and resemble or fit the Holocaust model. As scholars such as Martin Shaw describe, the codification of genocide as a crime under international law, and the neglect of Lemkin’s original historical and sociological work, has similarly engendered a narrow focus on mass killing as the sharp empirically identifiable end of destruction. In fact, it is little known that Lemkin developed many of the ideas he would later subsume under the term genocide before the Nazi Holocaust.

Symptomatic of this in the case of Myanmar is the tendency to focus on body counts and the occurrence and intensity of mass killings to the neglect of other, perhaps more attritional or socio-cultural forms of group destruction such as forced displacement, destruction of livelihoods, mass rape, and enforced starvation. Additionally, due to the wide influence of the (highly problematic) legal framework of the UN Genocide Convention, the unambiguous identification of perpetrators’

calculated intent is often cast as the pivotal factor in determining the character of violence against the Rohingya. But we might ask why the subjectivity and moral quality of the perpetrator group is more important than the experiences of the victims? Furthermore, while many assume that a simplistic and decontextualized idea of intent must be clearly demonstrable in cases of genocide, recent scholarship has suggested that Lemkin himself had a much more nuanced perspective on this than has been hitherto recognized; Latin words in the preface to *Axis Rule* read, 'He in whose interest it was, did it' (Tony Barta, 2013).

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However, these more nuanced sociological interpretations do not translate easily into the political realm, and are certainly not amenable to media sound bites. Mention of genocide at this level inevitably becomes contorted into a simplistic narrative of conflict and violence. But it is one thing to correctly identify the vast and horrifying destruction of the Rohingya as an unfolding genocide within the context of this broader framework; it is another to believe that therein lies a solution to the inaction of political leaders, or a clear guide to action. Words are important. Correctly naming the distinctive form of destruction that has been faced is especially significant for the victims, for whom denial can be retraumatising. But sadly, this does not alter the fact that the political promise of naming is far from certain, as the case of Darfur in particular demonstrates. For all the international attention Darfur received starting in 2003—high-level recognition of genocide, the multiple UN peacekeeping forces and international diplomacy, not to mention the ICC's indictment of President al-Bashir for genocide—the situation across the country, and now also in the new state of South Sudan, remains one of unfolding tragedy.

Indeed, with its reliance on a now standard script that pushes for bolder pronouncements from the 'international community', military intervention, and the activation of international juridical mechanisms, most discussions around the prevention of genocide become superficially decoupled from the complex contexts out of which genocide, and the incipient conditions for genocide, have emerged. Of course, these discussions must be seen in the contexts of urgency in which they take place. Yet the possibility of a real ground for meaningful anti-genocide action or politics arguably depends upon confrontation with, and a more systematic tracing of, the complex entanglements of genocidal processes and structures within these

broader societal conflicts and trends. Importantly, these must be situated in a global political and economic context. The ‘event’ of genocide in Myanmar—and the way we talk about it—cannot be bounded as a temporally punctuated internal or domestic issue, or separated from long-term processes are that rarely sufficiently interrogated in relation to the recent violence. In particular, the complex interactions between colonial legacies, globalization, and neoliberal economics (the latter driving an unprecedented wave of land grabs), are deeply implicated in the genocide’s historical genesis, and should be part of the conversation about possible ways forward.

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It is these connections—rather than a focus on how our elites apply labels or the depoliticizing preoccupation with ‘evil’ individual leaders—that could be productively drawn into the vocabulary and repertoire of genocide prevention discourse and activism. But such issues are usually seen (by both genocide activists and scholars) as falling beyond the scope of any form of anti-genocide action. Likewise, the focus on pushing those with the power to deploy official labels to name ‘genocide’, and the implicit model of political change it embodies, obscures other potential avenues of action. The situation in Rakhine is incontrovertibly genocide. But whilst naming the atrocity accurately is deeply important—for the victims especially, and for helping us grasp the true extent and character of human destruction that is unfolding—it is not a panacea; it brings its own dangers and is, unfortunately, the least that can be done.

Notes

1. As the anthropologist Alexander Hinton has pointed out, ‘Critical Genocide Studies’, *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, (2012), vol. 7, no. 1. Available at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol7/iss1/3/

2. See Chapter IX of Lemkin, R. (1944). *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress,* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).

Available at: http://www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/AxisRule1944-1.htm

3. Ibid.

4. Notably Martin Shaw. See Shaw, M. (2007). *What is Genocide?* (Cambridge: Polity).

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