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GENOCIDE: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Charles H. Anderton[1]

ABSTRACT
This article surveys risk factors for genocide and genocide prevention from the perspectives of four social science disciplines: sociology, social psychology, political science, and economics. Each discipline brings a valuable set of concepts and tools to bear in genocide research. Moreover, fruitful multi- and inter-disciplinary collaboration across the four disciplines (and other fields) is shedding new insights into why genocide has have been such a recurring tragedy in human affairs and how such atrocities can be prevented.

Key words: Genocide, Mass Killing, Genocide Prevention, Behavioral Experiments, Loss Aversion, Psychic Numbing

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INTRODUCTION

When people hear the word *genocide*, they often think of the Holocaust (1933-1945) in which leaders in Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe fostered the extermination of roughly six million Jews and millions more across other groups (e.g., Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, Poles, religious objectors, homosexuals, handicapped). In the 1950s, research attempting to explain why the Holocaust occurred began to emerge. Much of the early research suggested the Holocaust happened because Nazi leaders and other perpetrators suffered from psychopathology (i.e., they were "mad"), had corrupted personalities (i.e., they were "bad"), and/or were products of a deeply embedded anti-Semitic culture (i.e., extreme ideology) (Gilbert 1950, Dicks 1950, Waller 2007, chapters 1-4). Waller (2007) characterizes this early view of the Holocaust as the "*extraordinary* origins of extraordinary evil," which I label simply as the "Bad Nazi Thesis."

A major problem with the "Bad Nazi Thesis" is that genocides are not rare. Since the end of World War II, more than 40 genocides and at least 100 non-genocidal forms of large-scale intentional killings of civilians, known as *mass killings*, have been documented (Anderton 2016). If genocide and other forms of mass atrocity require uncommon personalities and/or unusually extreme ideologies, why are they such an *ordinary* feature of human behavior? A second major problem with the "Bad Nazi Thesis" is that new research in the 1970s and 1980s painted a distinctly different picture of the origins of the Holocaust and other genocides. Led by sociologists (e.g., Helen Fein, Leo Kuper), social psychologists (Israel Charny, Ervin Staub), political scientists (e.g., Barbara Harff, Robert Melson), and historians (e.g., Rouben Paul Adalian, Christopher Browning), the new research emphasized the "*ordinary* origins of extraordinary evil" (Waller 2007, chapters 5-8). In this new paradigm, the architects and perpetrators of the Holocaust and other genocides seemed to be ordinary people; they scored

within normal ranges on standard personality tests and their behaviors, outside of atrocity perpetration, in such contexts as family life and community relations were normal and even commendable (see personal case histories of perpetrators in Waller 2007). The new research also highlighted the goal orientations of genocide architects and perpetrators, which varied considerably, but nonetheless implied that the conception and execution of various phases of mass atrocity could serve strategic purposes and in this sense be seen as "rational."

The objective of this article is to highlight perspectives from the social sciences into the "ordinary" and even "rational" origins of genocides and how they might be prevented.[2] Many social science disciplines, as well as disciplines in the humanities (e.g., history, languages, philosophy, religion, visual arts) and sciences (e.g., biology, neurobiology, psychopathology), provide valuable insights into genocidal behavior, but it is beyond the scope of this article to survey such a breadth of literature. Instead, I focus upon critical insights into genocide risk and prevention from four social science disciplines: sociology, social psychology, political science, and economics. Even within this limited set of disciplines, given space constraints, my surveys must be selective and brief.

The essay is organized as follows. The next two sections cover definitions and data patterns of genocides and mass killings. The subsequent section surveys key ideas on genocide risk from sociology, social psychology, political science, and economics. The four disciplines are not separate silos for studying genocide because many of the key aspects of genocidal behavior have multiple and reinforcing wellsprings emanating from conditions that are studied within

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[2] The notion of "ordinary" and "rational" origins of genocide in no way implies that genocide is reasonable. Obviously, such atrocities are horrific and should be condemned. When social scientists and other scholars seek to understand the motives of genocide perpetrators, the motives discovered do not justify the actions of the perpetrators. In a similar manner, police detectives seek to identify the motives of suspects in murder investigations, not to justify the motives of the murderer but to find the perpetrator and bring her or him to justice. Moreover, by better understanding the motives of genocide perpetrators, scholars, policymakers, and activists can hopefully reduce the number and seriousness of such atrocities in the future.

these disciplines. Hence, the four disciplinary viewpoints also point to fruitful interdisciplinary perspectives for understanding genocide. The concluding section sums up with several thoughts on the disciplinary and interdisciplinary study of genocide and its prevention.

DEFINITIONS OF GENOCIDE AND OTHER MASS ATROCITIES

In his seminal 1944 book on the Holocaust, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, Raphael Lemkin combined the Greek word *genos* (race, tribe) and the Latin *cide* (killing) to form a new word: *genocide*. In its briefest form, genocide means to kill or destroy a people group. Lemkin, however, spent chapter 9 of his ground-breaking book, and really the whole book, explaining how much he meant by the term genocide. For example, Lemkin emphasized that genocide has two phases: (1) "destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group" and (2) "imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor" (Lemkin 1944, p. 79). Hence, genocide is not just the elimination of a people group, it also involves the flourishing of the oppressor group in place of (and at the expense of) the oppressed. Furthermore, genocide was a "synchronized attack" and a "coordinated plan of different actions" directed against an oppressed group's existence (Lemkin 1944, pp. xi and 79). The synchronization and various actions of genocide struck across eight dimensions or "fields" in which group elimination was accomplished:

[I]n the political field (by destroying institutions of self-government and imposing a German pattern of administration, and through colonization by Germans); in the social field (by disrupting the social cohesion of the nation involved and killing or removing elements such as the intelligentsia …); in the cultural field (by prohibiting or destroying cultural institutions and cultural activities; by substituting vocational education for education in the liberal arts …); in the economic field (by shifting wealth to Germans and

by prohibiting the exercise of trades and occupations by people who do not promote

Germanism "without reservations"); in the biological field (by a policy of depopulation

and by promoting procreation by Germans in occupied countries); in the field of physical

existence (by introducing a starvation rationing system for non-Germans and by mass

killings …); in the religious field (by interfering with the activities of the Church …); in

the field of morality (by attempts to create an atmosphere of moral debasement …)

(Lemkin (1944, pp. xi-xii).

Among the many critical aspects of Lemkin's conceptualization of genocide are three that I

emphasize: (1) genocide is multifaceted; it is an assault upon many, and in some cases all, of the

eight essential foundations of a people group's existence; (2) genocide does not necessarily

imply outright physical killing, although it usually does; nevertheless, a targeted group can be

eliminated by prohibiting its procreation and/or destroying its culture, institutions, and religion

and forcing it to assimilate into the dominant group; and (3) the nature and actions of genocide

plague so many aspects of human life that perspectives from multiple disciplines are not just

desirable, but essential, for understanding genocide risk and prevention.

It was Lemkin's dream to see genocide become a punishable crime in international law

and he worked tirelessly toward that end through the United Nations, political leaders, and other

organizations (Waller 2016). In December 1948, the United Nations established genocide as a

crime under international law. In Article II of the 1948 United Nations (UN) Convention on the

Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, genocide is defined as

…any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a

national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b)

Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately

inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (United Nations 1948). Note that the dimensions of genocide under Lemkin's conceptualization are much broader than the Convention's. The Convention focuses on the physical destruction of an oppressed group such as killing, serious bodily harm, and physical destruction (see parts a-c). Certainly physical destruction of a people group is critical in Lemkin's conception of genocide, but the "physical" is just one of Lemkin's eight fields.

A large literature analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the conceptions of genocide offered by Lemkin and the Convention including criticisms regarding groups left out (e.g., political groups), difficulties with proving intent, and the inability of the Convention to prevent genocide. Many scholars have proposed their own definitions of genocide and other civilian atrocity concepts. For example, some scholars distinguish genocide and mass killing where genocide is the targeting of a group for destruction based on the group's characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, race, religion) and *mass killing* is civilian destruction without a clear designation of group membership or where the intention to eliminate the group as such is absent (Staub 1989, p. 8; Waller 2007, p. 14). Other scholars, however, maintain that distinguishing genocide and mass killing runs into difficulties regarding perpetrator intentions or characteristics of targeted groups so that it is not fruitful for research to distinguish the two (see, e.g., Ulfelder and Valentino 2008). Still others argue that the term genocide does not need to be distinguished from other forms of intentional violence against civilians "because genocide gives us a framework for bringing together the varied phenomena of anti-civilian violence and understanding the relationships among them" (Shaw 2003, p. 153). To complicate matters further, there are other

atrocity crimes distinct from but often associated with genocide including *war crimes*, *crimes against humanity*, and *ethnic cleansing*. Following Anderton and Brauer (2016b), I categorize genocide, mass killing, and other atrocity crimes under the broad category of *mass atrocities*.[3] A continuing challenge for genocide research is how to conceptualize genocide and when to distinguish it from and integrate it with other forms of atrocities against civilians.

PATTERNS OF GENOCIDES AND MASS KILLINGS

Figure 1 shows the number of states perpetrating genocides and mass atrocities (genocides and mass killings) per year over the period 1956-2014. A key message of Figure 1 is that for the almost 60 years covered by the genocide data there were one or more genocides in the world *each year* with the exception of 2012. Furthermore, for the mass atrocity data there were at least two, and often far more than two, mass atrocities in the world *each year*.

Figure 2 shows estimated fatalities from selected state-perpetrated post-World War II genocides. The data are extremely disturbing when considering that the victims of such atrocities are noncombatant civilians, including children and the elderly along with male and female adults. Moreover, such fatalities sometimes occur after severe brutalities were inflicted on the victims including rape, torture, and coercing people to rape or kill family members (von Joeden-Forgey 2016). Furthermore, according to Anderton (2016), estimated fatalities totaled over only three of the genocides in Figure 2 (Cambodia 1975-1979, Pakistan 1971, and Sudan 1983-2002)

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[3] According to Anderton and Brauer (2016b), "*Crimes against humanity* are systematic attacks against civilians involving inhumane means such as extermination, forcible population transfer, torture, rape, and disappearances. *War crimes* are grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions including willful killing, willfully causing great suffering or serious injury, extensive destruction and appropriation of property, and torture. *Ethnic cleansing* is the removal of a particular group of people from a state or region using such means as forced migration and/or mass killing (Pégorier 2013). Ethnic cleansing is not, however, defined as an atrocity crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court." For reviews of mass atrocity definitions and controversies see Curthoys and Docker (2008), Meierhenrich (2014, pp. 56-104), and Waller (2016).

surpasses the total estimated military fatalities for the 239 civil (intrastate) wars fought over the period 1900 to 2014. Anderton also documents that about as many people were killed in six weeks during the 1994 Rwandan genocide (estimated to be 315,000) as died in all worldwide international and domestic terrorist incidents from 1970 to 2014 (estimated to be 307,000).

Figures 1 and 2 focus on mass atrocities perpetrated by states, but *nonstate groups* perpetrate atrocities too. Anderton (2016) documents about three dozen nonstate groups that carried out mass atrocities within the 1989 to 2014 period. Furthermore, the only dataset that specifically tracks genocides, the Political Instability Task Force (PITF), has designated the Islamic State as a perpetrator of genocide in its 2014 update (Marshall, Gurr, and Harff 2015). This is the first time that PITF has identified a nonstate group as the *main* perpetrator of genocide.
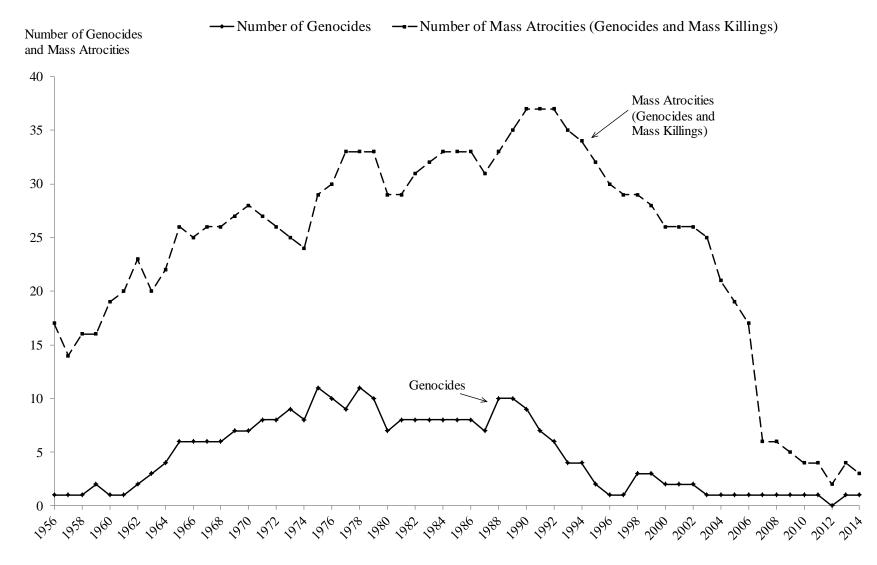
FIGURE 1 – Number of state-perpetrated genocides and mass atrocities by year, 1956-2014

SOURCES: Adapted from Anderton (2016) and sources therein and Marshall, Gurr, and Harff (2015)
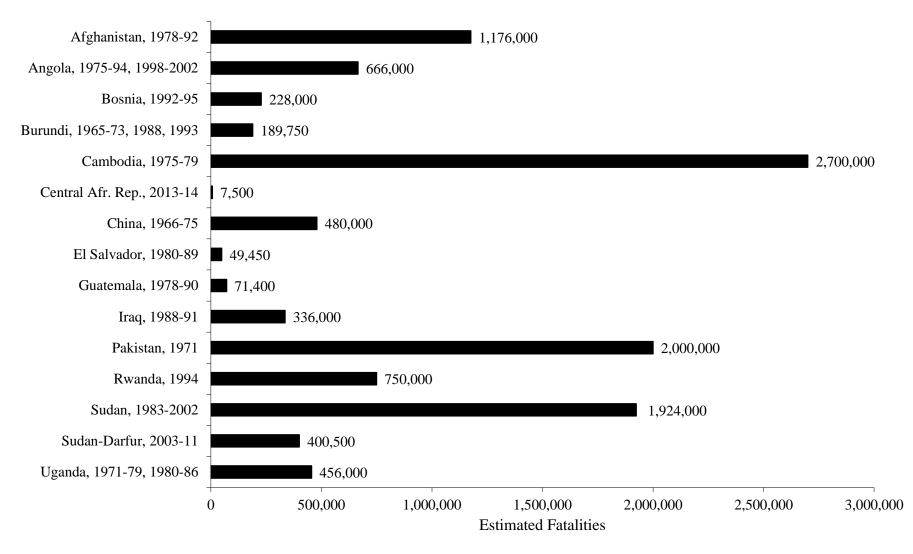
FIGURE 2 – Estimated fatalities from selected state-perpetrated post-World War II genocides

Country	Estimated Fatalities
Afghanistan, 1978-92	1,176,000
Angola, 1975-94, 1998-2002	666,000
Bosnia, 1992-95	228,000
Burundi, 1965-73, 1988, 1993	189,750
Cambodia, 1975-79	2,700,000
Central Afr. Rep., 2013-14	7,500
China, 1966-75	480,000
El Salvador, 1980-89	49,450
Guatemala, 1978-90	71,400
Iraq, 1988-91	336,000
Pakistan, 1971	2,000,000
Rwanda, 1994	750,000
Sudan, 1983-2002	1,924,000
Sudan-Darfur, 2003-11	400,500
Uganda, 1971-79, 1980-86	456,000

Estimated Fatalities

SOURCE: Midpoint fatality estimates based on the Political Instability Task Force geno-politicide dataset (Marshall, Gurr, and Harff 2015)

Taken together, Figures 1 and 2 imply that genocides and mass killings occur quite frequently in human affairs. The number of such atrocities is counted *per year* rather than per decade. Imagine if the number of major airline crashes in a year was eight or ten; the flying public would be in a state of fear and rightly so. And yet, the average number of mass atrocities (genocides and mass killings) present per year in the world since 1956 is 24, and such incidents correspond to fatalities, not in the hundreds, but often in the tens or hundreds of thousands. It is as if the international community and people generally are numb to the devastation wrought by mass atrocities. Another truly disturbing aspect implied by Figures 1 and 2 is that many "ordinary" people must participate for mass atrocities to occur. Outside of major city bombing campaigns or weapons of mass destruction (e.g., nuclear, biological weapons), it is not possible for a small group of leaders to kill thousands or even millions of civilians. Such atrocities require that thousands of perpetrators go along with the desires of genocide architects for such devastation to occur. Such people cannot, for the most part, be psychopathological because psychopathology is relatively rare. Hence, one of the great challenges of genocide research is to understand how ordinary people can be swept up into perpetrating, or not resisting, genocide and mass killing. The social sciences provide important insights into these and other disturbing aspects of mass atrocities, to which I now turn.

PERSPECTIVES ON GENOCIDE FROM SELECTED SOCIAL SCIENCE DISCIPLINES

SOCIOLOGY

Shaw (2010, p. 142) characterizes genocide as a "peculiarly sociological crime" because the very nature of genocide is one in which social classification is manipulated, distorted, and

perverted against one or more groups by atrocity architects and other perpetrators. Until the late 1970s, the discipline of sociology did not recognize genocide as a phenomenon that should be analyzed in sociological terms. The neglect was due, in part, to the discipline's unwillingness to look at extreme human behavior including "evil" (Shaw 2010, p. 144).

Pioneering research on the Holocaust and genocide by sociologists Helen Fein (1979, 1993), Leo Kuper (1977, 1981), and Zygmunt Bauman (1989) opened the door to the sociological study of genocide. Such research has contributed to greater understanding of what genocide is and is not and, most significantly, to the roles that social categorization, structure, and processes play in precipitating genocide. One of the distinctive contributions of the early sociological research on genocide was to show how a people group within a broader society could come to be designated as "alien" or "other" by political leaders in a society. In extreme cases of such "othering," people from the out-group would, to use Fein's phrase, "fall outside the universe of moral obligation" of the dominant group. When people from the out-group are so designated, they are often treated discriminatorily and may come to be treated murderously by people from the dominant group.

In-group/out-group discrimination exists just about everywhere, so the key issue is not the existence of "othering" *per se*, but the circumstances in which it can become so extreme that it crosses into genocide. The early sociologists maintained, as do virtually all genocide scholars today, that there is not one path or formula by which genocide breaks out and spreads. Rather, there are various enabling circumstances that can foster genocide. Moreover, genocide often emerges in phases in which the initial goals of the perpetrators do not include outright extermination of the victim group. Two key questions for the early sociologists (and they remain highly relevant today) were: (1) What social factors and conditions cause a people group to

become an out-group? (2) What are the enabling circumstances that cause mistreatment of the

out-group to cross into genocide? It is beyond the scope of this article to survey in detail the

work of the early sociologist on these two questions. Instead, I provide a brief overview of the

thinking of two early sociologists on the questions: Helen Fein and Leo Kuper.

Fein (1979, pp. 8-10) maintains that the outing of a people group can benefit a state's

political leaders when it increases the state's legitimacy and the dominant group's control of the

state. Such "benefits" are most likely to arise when the state is weak internally (e.g., low

solidarity among various in- groups) and has suffered past defeats in war and losses of territory.

The out-group being identified as outside the universe of the in-group's moral obligation,

however, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for genocide. If this outing is combined with

current defeats in war and internal strife in which a "political or cultural crisis of national

identity" emerges, the risk of genocide increases (Fein 1979, p. 9). The genocide risk is further

magnified if the political elite adopts a new formula or narrative to justify and solidify its

political control and the potential cost of brutal treatment of the out-group is low (owing, for

example, to a low probability that third parties would intervene on behalf of the out-group). Such

conditions can vary from case to case and even within a given nation over time, giving rise the

phenomenon of genocide emerging in "fits and starts" or not emerging when it seemed likely it

would. Nevertheless, Fein's conditions represent an "explanatory sketch" of genocide that can be

applied across many historical and potential future cases of mass atrocity.

Kuper's (1977, 1981) early sociological research on genocide also contains perspectives

that remain highly relevant in genocide studies today. Among his many insights into the causes

of genocide and the failures of the international community to prevent mass atrocities are his

analyses of social processes of exclusion of an out-group and how these can lead to the

rationalization of mass murder in the minds of perpetrators. Kuper (1977) describes how a society can move to the point in which there is deep polarization between a dominant in-group and a socially constructed out-group in which the stage is set for genocide:

> Polarisation may be a deliberate policy, or an unpremeditated consequence of strategies pursued. There are certain clichés of action, almost involuntary idiomatic actions, which feed into the process of polarization. Action and reaction, premeditated and involuntary, may so intermesh as to move violence to higher levels of destruction through escalating cycles of polarisation (Kuper 1977, p. 127).

The movement of violence to higher levels can cause key perpetrators from the in-group to cross a point of no return in which genocidal actions become socially "normal" and even rewarding (e.g., through perpetrators' career advancement and looting of victims assets). At its worst, polarizing violence leads not only to extremes of brutality such as the torture and mass murder of children, women, men, and the elderly, but such actions are seen as necessary and even "good" for society. When the point of no return is crossed, the dominant group becomes "locked in" to a program of destruction of the out-group such that moderate voices for peace are excluded:

> By the middle ground, I refer to those relationships between people of different racial, religious or ethnic background, and those ideologies, which might form the basis for movements of inter-group cooperation and of radical change, without resort to destructive violence. Where the carriers of these ideologies are significant in number or power, the process of polarisation requires that they be appreciably recruited or coerced into one or other of the warring camps, and that the irreducible minority is either silenced or eliminated, at the same time that its ideologies of conciliation are discredited (Kuper 1977, p. 209).

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

As noted above in Figure 2, the number of people killed in genocides is often in the tens or hundreds of thousands and, in some cases, in the millions. It is not possible (outside of city bombing campaigns or weapons of mass destruction) for a small number of genocide architects to kill such a large number of victims. Rather, it takes *many* people to become perpetrators of genocide for thousands or millions of people from the out-group to be killed. For example, it is estimated that between 100,000 and 500,000 people actively participated in the murder of six million Jews during the Holocaust (Waller 2007, p. 16). For the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which about 750,000 people were murdered, Straus (2004) estimates that between 175,000 and 210,000 people actively participated in the killing. Since psychopathology is relatively rare, most genocide scholars reach the disturbing conclusion that "ordinary people" (i.e., people like you and me) must get caught up in social processes and cognitive states in which they become willing to perpetrate, or refuse to resist, genocide. How can this be?
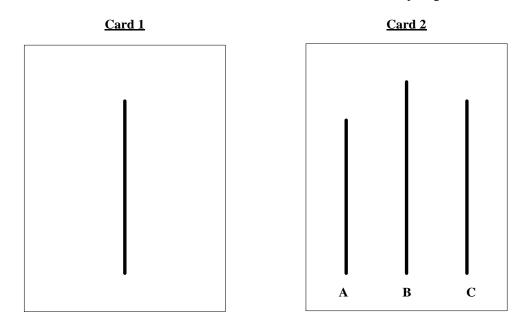
Social psychologists have added a great deal to our understanding of genocide perpetration by ordinary people. Such explanations hinge on the distinction between what Roth (2010, p. 199) calls *situationism* and *dispositionalism*. Under situationism, situational variables (e.g., a person's immediate social settings such as neighborhood and workplace) affect individual and group behavior. Dispositionalism focuses on the internal dispositions of individuals (e.g., whether a person is aggressive or welcoming toward people from other groups). Among social psychologists who do research on genocide, many lean strongly in the direction of situationism to explain how ordinary people become perpetrators. For example, Waller (2007, p. 269) states that evil behavior is "a product of situational influences that channel action in particular

directions." Similarly, Roth (2010, p. 199) indicates that "situational variables most often prove determinative of individual and group behavior."

According to Roth (2010, p. 199), the key factor that defines a person's situation is "the group or social norms that implicitly or explicitly govern expected behavior in the situation." Hence, many individuals who find themselves in a situation in which the social norms and expectations are to discriminate against a people group, and even to have such people "cleansed" from the social group, will come to participate in, or not resist, such norms. Tragically, such situational pressures to conform to the genocide architects' wishes by explicitly participating in genocide or looking the other way occur in all genocides and for thousands of ordinary people.

Application of the situationist perspective to understanding genocide perpetration is built upon several path-breaking experiments in social psychology, especially those of Asch (1951), Milgram (1963), and Zimbardo (1971). The Asch experiment reveals a surprising degree of conformity to an experimentally-contrived erroneous group norm. Figure 3 shows the information presented to subjects in the experiment. Each subject was given the two cards shown in the figure. The line on the first card is the exact length of line C on the second card, but the subjects were not told this. Each subject was asked to state out loud which line on the second card matched the length of the line on the first card. Various trials of eight male college students participated in each run of the experiment, but only one of the eight was a true subject of the experiment. Seven of the eight recruits were "actors" employed by Asch to construct an erroneous group norm in order to study the behavior of the one true subject per trial. In each trial, the seven actors would choose in turn the matching line on the right card and then the true subject would choose last. In some trials the seven actors would unanimously choose the correct line C, but in other trials they would unanimously choose the same incorrect line. For the trials in

which the seven actors chose correctly, the rate of incorrect answers by subjects was less than one percent. For the incorrect trials, however, Asch found, that 36.8 percent of subject choices conformed to the actors' erroneous selection. Moreover, subjects participated in multiple trials and Asch found that 75 percent of subjects gave at least one wrong answer in the incorrect trials in which they participated. The Asch experiment revealed a *conformity effect* associated with situational variables that was not good news when thinking about genocide. If, owing to situational variables, subjects could be prone to making erroneous choices when the costs of doing so were small, how much more might they go along with or look the other way when tyrannous leaders demanded conformity (through threats and rewards) to their genocidal aims.

FIGURE 3 – Pairs of cards used in the Asch conformity experiment

Card 1   **Card 2**

SOURCE: Based on Asch (1951)

Another foundational experiment in the situationist paradigm of social psychology is Milgram (1963). The experiment involved three individuals: an "actor" pretending to be a subject in the experiment, a person in a white coat who ran the experiment (the "authority"

figure), and a true experimental subject. The actor was given the role of learner in the experiment and the subject was a teacher who was directed to follow the orders of the authority figure running the experiment. The subject believed that the assignment to the roles of learner and teacher was random, but actually the assignment was rigged so that the actor would be the learner and the subject the teacher. After the role assignments, the actor (learner) and subject (teacher) were placed in separate rooms where they could hear but not see each other. Prior to the actual running of the experiment, the subject was told that the learner had a heart condition and the subject was given a relatively mild sample electric shock to experience what a low-level shock would supposedly be like for the learner. In actuality, the learner did not receive any real shocks, only pretend ones to see how the unknowing subject would react. The authority figure instructed the subject to read a pair of words to the learner. The subject was told to then read the first word of each pair and four possible answers, one of which aligned with the second word in the pair. The learner would press a button to indicate which of the four possible answers aligned with the second word in the pair. A correct answer would cause the subject to move to the next word pair and repeat the exercise. An incorrect answer would be met with a slight shock of 15 volts at first, but increasing by 15 volts for each subsequent incorrect answer. The actor-learner was pre-instructed to answer incorrectly with enough frequency that the volts administered by the subject would escalate to higher levels, even those clearly labeled to the subject as severe.

Table 1 summarizes the intensity of shocks (ranging from 15 to 450 volts) that subjects believed were in play during the experiment and the choices that the subjects made to administer shocks at the direction of the authority figure. Prior to running the experiment, Milgram polled 14 Yale University senior psychology majors to gauge their expectation of the percent of subjects in the experiment that would eventually choose the highest level of shock (450 volts,

TABLE 1 – Shock levels chosen in Milgram obedience experiment

Shock Level Knowingly Administered By Subject (In Volts)	Number Of Subjects (Out Of 40) For Whom This Was The Maximum Shock
Slight Shock	
15	0
30	0
45	0
60	0
Moderate Shock	
75	0
90	0
105	0
120	0
Strong Shock	
135	0
150	0
165	0
180	0
Very Strong Shock	
195	0
210	0
225	0
240	0
Intense Shock	
255	0
270	0
285	0
300	5
Extreme Intensity Shock	
315	4
330	2
345	1
360	1
Danger: Severe Shock	
375	1
390	0
405	0
420	0
XXX	
435	0
450	26
	N=40

SOURCE: Milgram (1963, p. 376)

labeled in the XXX range in Table 1). The mean response was that out of 100 subjects, 1.2

percent would eventually choose the highest level. The most "pessimistic" of the Yale seniors

predicted that 3 percent would go that high. Milgram found, however, that of the 40 subjects who

participated in the experiment, all selected at least an intense degree of shock (300 volts or more)

and 26 of the 40 (65 percent) chose the highest level of shock (450 volts). The results were all

the more surprising when considering that as the experiment moved into higher levels of voltage,

the actor-learner (who was not receiving real shocks) shrieked and screamed in ways that could

be heard by the subject. Even under these conditions of apparent suffering, subjects continued to

administer higher levels of shock because an authority figure in a white coat told them that it was

important that they continue. If, owing to obedience to authority, subjects could choose to

impose suffering when the cost of refusing to harm was so low, how much more might people be

prone to obey the authority of tyrannous leaders who can bring substantial penalties to bear on

those who refuse to go along with their genocidal aims.

A third foundational experiment in the situationist paradigm of social psychology is the

Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) on power relations between guards and prisoners (Zimbardo

1971). The experiment randomly assigned 24 subjects to the roles of prisoner and guard in a

mock prison situation that was supposed to play out over a period of two weeks. Zimbardo and

his research team found that those assigned to the role of guard came to act in strongly

authoritarian ways including subjecting the prisoners to physical punishment and psychological

torture. Meanwhile, some of the prisoners submitted to the abuse while others revolted. Owing to

the escalating abuse against the prisoners, the experiment was stopped after just six days. The

behavioral extremes revealed in the experiment, which surprised Zimbardo and the others on his

research team, suggested that it was not the personalities of the guards (i.e., their dispositions),

but the situations that the guards were in that facilitated their oppressive actions. Such positioning of in-group authorities in dominance over those designated as an out-group lies at the core of genocidal actions of extreme discrimination, including murder. The disturbing result of the experiment is that ordinary people can come to "legitimize" in their own minds such abusive behavior because they are (1) in a position of authority, (2) face no social or institutional context restraining them, and (3) can cognitively learn to ignore the dissonance that might otherwise arise in their minds indicating that what they are doing is wrong.

POLITICAL SCIENCE

As a discipline, political science did not really move into genocide research until the 1990s. According to Straus (2010, p. 167), the end of the Cold War in 1990 and a series of high profile civil wars and genocides in the 1990s and the early 2000s (e.g., Balkan wars and mass atrocities in the mid-to-late 1990s, Rwanda civil war and genocide in 1990-1994, atrocities in Sudan/Darfur beginning in the early 2000s) fostered growing interest by political scientists in genocide research. Further interest within the field was fueled by the UN Security Council's formation of a special advisor on genocide prevention in 2004, development of the Responsibility to Protect norm at the 2005 UN World Summit, and release of a genocide prevention report in 2008 by a team of scholars and policymakers led by former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, and former US Secretary of Defense, William Cohen (Albright and Cohen 2008, Straus 2010, pp. 167-168).

Among the many important research avenues brought to the study of genocide by political scientists are four highlighted by Straus (2010, p. 168): (1) comparative study of genocide, (2) importance of regime type (e.g., autocracy, anocracy, democracy, transitioning

regime type) in understanding genocide, (3) rationalist explanations of genocide, and (4)

connections between war and genocide. Political scientists also promoted the application of

quantitative methods in genocide research including formal game theory models and assessments

of genocide risk using statistical methods.

An important example of comparative genocide research in political science is Melson

(1992), who compared and contrasted the Armenian genocide (1915-1918) and the Holocaust.

Among Melson's key results was how, in each case, revolution prior to genocide divided people

into in-groups and out-groups and the emergence of a new war increased the risk that out-groups

would be seen as enemies of the state and targeted for extermination (Straus 2010, p. 170). Many

other political scientists followed in Melson's footsteps and studied multiple cases of genocide

and mass killing comparatively (see, e.g., Valentino 2004 and Midlarsky 2005).

Another type of comparative research is to apply statistical methods to a large sample of

countries to ascertain risk factors for genocide. Krain (1997), for example, statistically analyzed

genocide risk factors for the perio201 1948 to 1982 based on a sample of about 4000 country-

year observations containing 35 genocides. Krain found that civil war is a strong predictor of

genocide onset and interstate war and periods of decolonization also increase risk. The most

prominent empirical study of genocide risk in the literature is Harff (2003), who identified 126

countries that experienced state failure (e.g., regime collapse, civil war) at some point in the

1955 to 1997 period. Of the 126 cases of state failure, 35 culminated in genocide. Conditioned

on state failure, Harff's statistical analysis identified six key risk factors for genocide: (1)

magnitude of political upheaval, (2) history of prior genocide, (3) exclusionary ideology by the

ruling elite, (4) autocratic regime, (5) ethnic minority elite, and (6) low trade openness. The

empirical work of Krain and Harff were foundational to an emerging body of statistical research

on genocide risk, conducted mostly by political scientists, which currently numbers about three dozen publications (for a review of this literature, see Hoeffler 2016).

Many comparative case studies and, especially, empirical studies in political science find that non-democratic regimes (e.g., autocracy, anocracy) correlate to greater genocide risk. For example, according to Rummel (1998), autocracy is the major risk factor for genocide and other mass atrocities perpetrated by governments. Moreover, one of Harff's six risk factors noted above is autocracy. But such results are subject to controversy among scholars. For example, many genocide and mass killing (GMK) samples used in empirical research focus on the post-World War II period. There is strong evidence that some democratic states committed or allowed GMKs in the past, for example, against native peoples. Such cases that occurred in earlier centuries or prior to World War II would not be part of the samples of modern empirical genocide research. Moreover, new empirical research is beginning to consider that it may not be regime type *per se*, but the *transition* of a political regime (e.g., transition from autocracy to anocracy and then to democracy), that may be most important for understanding genocide risk. For example, Anderton and Carter (2105) found strong empirical evidence of an inverted-U relationship between regime type and genocide risk based on a sample of close to 200 countries over the 1956-2006 period. Their result is summarized in Figure 4. The figure implies that, controlling for other factors, autocracies have a greater risk of genocide than democracies, but "in-between" political regimes (i.e., anocracies) have the greatest risk. An oft-cited goal in international affairs is to help states transition from autocracy to democracy. Figure 4 implies, however, that, everything else the same, such transitions will first move through anocracy in which genocide risk rises before it finally decreases in the democratic zone. Hence, pushing states from autocracy to democracy could initially elevate the GMK risk.
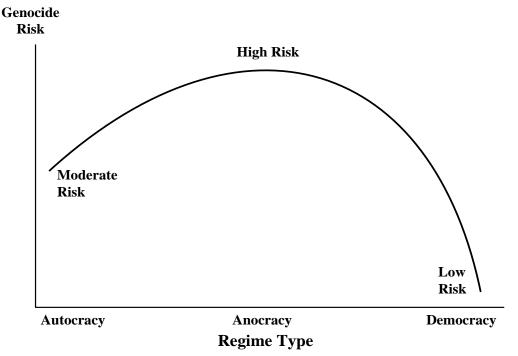
FIGURE 4 – Regime type and genocide risk (inverted-u hypothesis)

The figure shows that, controlling for other factors, autocracy is correlated with greater genocide risk than democracy, but intermediate regime types (i.e., anocracies) have the highest risk.

SOURCE: Based on empirical results in Anderton and Carter (2015, pp. 20-22)

Another important contribution by political scientists to the study of genocide is the consideration of the goals of genocide architects and the notion that their choice of genocide can be "rational." The word rational does *not* mean reasonable. In the social sciences, a rational decision is one in which the decisionmaker weighs the expected costs and benefits of various possible actions and choses an action designed to achieve the greatest feasible net benefit. A rational decision implies that the person has a *motive* in making her or his choice and is trying to achieve some objective. The choice could be horrific (e.g., murder, genocide), but if the choice is deliberately taken to achieve an objective, it is in this sense rational. One of the main motives for genocide and mass killing emphasized by political scientists is the strategic use of civilian extermination campaigns to increase or retain political power and/or territorial control when

facing threats from internal enemies. For example, the political elite in a weakened regime may perceive that killing civilians would weaken a rebel group that is dependent on civilian support, compel civilians to align with the state to protect their lives, and/or cause other groups within the state to more strongly support the political elite (e.g., by being rewarded with looted assets from those designated as out-groups) (see, e.g., Valentino 2004, Midlarsky 2005, Kalyvas 2006).

Finally, we note the importance of political science research on connections between war and mass atrocity. Virtually all genocides and mass killings occur in the context of war, although the reverse does not hold (i.e., there are many wars in which mass atrocities do not occur). Furthermore, almost all empirical studies of genocide risk that include war as a risk assessment variable find a positive correlation between war and genocide risk (Hoeffler 2016). One of the main explanations for the elevated risk of genocide during war is that war typically challenges the ruling elite's hold on political power. In many wars, especially civil wars, if the political elite loses, they will no longer have political power and may be incarcerated or executed. Hence, for the political elite, war can represent an *existential threat*. In extreme cases of existential threat, some political leaders have been willing to do just about anything to retain their hold on power, including carrying out atrocities against civilians. For more detailed analyses of connections between war and genocide, see Shaw (2003, 2007).

ECONOMICS

Substantial research on genocide by economists has begun to emerge only within the last several years.[4] Following Anderton and Brauer (2016b), Figure 5 highlights six critical ways in

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[4] For examples of early research on economic aspects of genocide see the citations in Anderton (2014, note 11). For more recent scholarship on genocide economics see the forthcoming 28-chapter edited volume on economic aspects of genocides and their prevention (Anderton and Brauer 2016a).

which genocides and mass killings (GMKs) are interconnected with economics as shown by the six boxes. Box 1 emphasizes the principle that GMKs are *choices*. As a social science devoted to the study of human choices, an extensive menu of theoretical models is available in economics (e.g., constrained optimization and game theory models) which can be applied to understand GMK choices and consequences. In economics, a distinction is often made between rational and nonrational motives underlying choices. Rational choice involves the purposeful weighing of expected costs and benefits by a decisionmaker over various feasible actions and the selection of the action that maximizes net benefits. Nonrational factors include social, psychological, and neurobiological phenomena that can cause choices to deviate from the strict predictions of rational choice theory. Box 2 implies that *economic conditions* (e.g., low per capita income, high unemployment) can affect the risk and seriousness of GMKs. The third box shows that GMKs can have significant *economic effects* via the "five Ds": disruption of economic outcomes caused by GMK such as diminished growth; diversion of resources away from ordinary economic activities such as building roads and education into attacking civilians; displacement of people such as refugees or internally displaced people fleeing violence; destruction of people and property; and the difficulty of post-GMK development. Box 4 highlights the wealth appropriation aspect of GMKs, which includes looting victims' assets (e.g., homes, jewelry) and bodies (e.g., enslavement, sexual exploitation) by genocide perpetrators. Box 5 shows that GMKs involve the application of business practices including efficient organization, supply chain and transportation management, resource acquisitions, and so on. Finally, the sixth box highlights that economies are critically dependent on underlying socioeconomic phenomena including security, health, and rule of law. When architects and perpetrators carry out GMK, they typically attack several, and often all, of these elements of a people group's economic vitality.
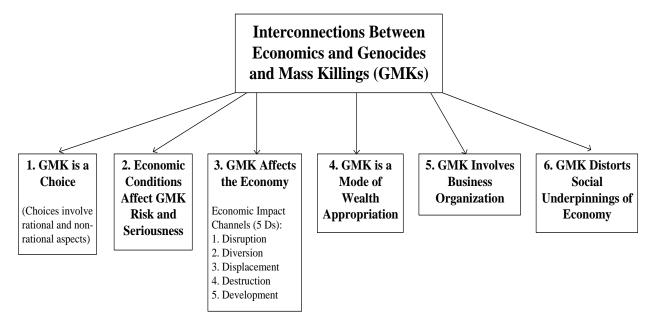
FIGURE 5 – Key economic aspects of genocides and mass killings

SOURCE: Adapted from Anderton and Brauer (2016b)

One of the most important developments in economics over the past half century has been the emergence of a new field within the discipline, namely *behavioral economics*, in which "insights from laboratory experiments, psychology, and other social sciences [are applied] in economics" in conjunction "with the standard economic [rational choice] model to get a better understanding" of human choices (Cartwright 2011, p. 4). Behavioral economics is a multi- and interdisciplinary field involving collaborative research among economists, social psychologists, psychologists, and others. There has been little application of the insights from behavioral economics to genocide, but there are two key discoveries within the field – loss aversion and psychic numbing – that are relevant for understanding why genocide architects choose mass atrocity and why potential third party interveners to stop genocide often do nothing.

Numerous experiments in behavioral economics have found that, relative to a previously established status quo (or reference point) such as current political power or territorial control, a decisionmaker perceives her or himself to be worse off from a loss than an equivalent gain

makes the person feel better off. This phenomenon is known as *loss aversion*. For example, if a political leader loses 100 acres of territory, the loss that the leader experiences will be much greater than the gain the leader would experience if 100 additional acres were acquired. What behavioral economists have discovered is that humans tend to "cognitively magnify" losses relative to equivalent gains beyond what standard rational choice theory predicts. Why is loss aversion potentially important for understanding genocide? Many case studies, theoretical models, and empirical studies of genocide posit that political leaders experience extreme pressure and even personal threat when they are *losing* an interstate war or *losing* control of their government to a rebel group. Such losses were characterized above as "existential threat." Rational choice and game theory models predict that, under certain conditions, political leaders will make extreme choices, sometimes even mass killing and genocide, to secure their control. Loss aversion suggests that such extreme choices would be more likely and more pronounced than even rational choice theory predicts because leaders would cognitively magnify the implications of such losses.[5]

Another critical discovery from behavioral economics, with important implications for genocide prevention, is *psychic numbing*. Based on extensive research on human cognitive and affective abilities (and inabilities), behavioral economists have discovered that people will often not care much more about large losses of life relative to small losses of life, and they may even care less. Slovic, *et al*. (2016) provide many examples of such psychic numbing including research that shows that people are *less* willing to send clean water to save lives in a refugee camp that was large (250,000) rather than small (11,000), people are *more* willing to donate money to Save the Children to feed an identified individual (a seven-year-old African girl named

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[5] Midlarsky (2005, chapters 5, 7, and 18) and Anderton and Brauer (2016c) explicitly introduce loss aversion into a theoretical analysis of genocide choice.

Rokia) than to donate to the same organization to help millions of Africans, and people are *less* willing to donate money to help two starving children than to help one. Slovic, *et al*. (2016) offer detailed analyses of psychic numbing and the importance of the phenomenon for understanding why individual citizens and political leaders in third party states that might intervene to help threatened populations seem complacent and prone to do nothing. These authors also provide numerous policy prescriptions for overcoming the problem of psychic numbing in genocide prevention policy.

Both loss aversion and psychic numbing can be pictured using variants of the famous S-shaped function from behavioral economics (Kahneman 2011, p. 282). In panel (a) of Figure 6, the S-shaped function moves from the lower left negative quadrant to the upper right positive quadrant. This panel applies to the decionmaking of a political leader who psychologically values the gain or loss of, say, territory. The vertical axis measures the psychological values associated with territorial losses (in the negative quadrant) and territorial gains (in the positive quadrant). The horizontal axes measures possible losses in territory (in the negative quadrant) and possible gains in territory (in the positive quadrant). *Loss aversion* is depicted in panel (a) in the following way: the psychological value of a loss in 100 acres of territory (measured by distance 0b) is much greater than the psychological value of a gain in 100 acres of territory (measured by distance 0a). This also holds for the psychological values associated with losses and gains of 200 acres (i.e., distance cd > distance ef). Hence, in panel (a) of Figure 6 the psychological value of losses is magnified relative to the psychological value of equivalent gains.

Psychic numbing is shown in panel (b) of Figure 6. The vertical axis measures the psychological value or importance of the loss of life to political leaders in a third party country, which might potentially intervene to protect victims of genocide. The horizontal axis measures

the magnitude of losses of life. *Psychic numbing* is depicted in panel (b) in the following way:

the psychological importance to third party political leaders of a loss of 10,000 lives in a nation

experiencing genocide is measured by distance 0h, but the *incremental* psychological value of

another 10,000 lives lost (out to 20,000 in total) is only the distance hi. Hence, political leaders

in panel (b) care very little about additional losses of life. Moreover, given the near flatness of

the curve at higher levels of fatalities (e.g., 50,000 and greater), the incremental value attached to

further losses of life is virtually zero. Even more disturbingly, Slovic, *et al*. (2016) maintain that

experimental evidence on psychic numbing cannot rule out the possibility that the curve in panel

(b) turns down, which implies that third parties would come to care less (incrementally and in

total) about a greater number of lives lost relative to a smaller amount lost.

CONCLUSIONS

Research on mass atrocities from the four social sciences summarized in this article, as

well as important contributions from many other disciplines not covered here, is culminating in a

truly multi- and inter-disciplinary effort to understand the causes of genocides and mass killings

and how they can be prevented. Even across just the four social sciences covered here, scholars

are employing a variety of tools and theoretical concepts, bringing to bear their own discipline's

comparative strengths in understanding genocide, and willingly drawing upon the ideas of other

disciplines to enhance their own research effectiveness. Just one example of the fruitfulness of

cross-pollinated research in genocide studies is how the choices of genocide architects and

perpetrators can have rational motivations (as emphasized in economics), but also critically

important nonrational elements as emphasized in sociology, social psychology, and political

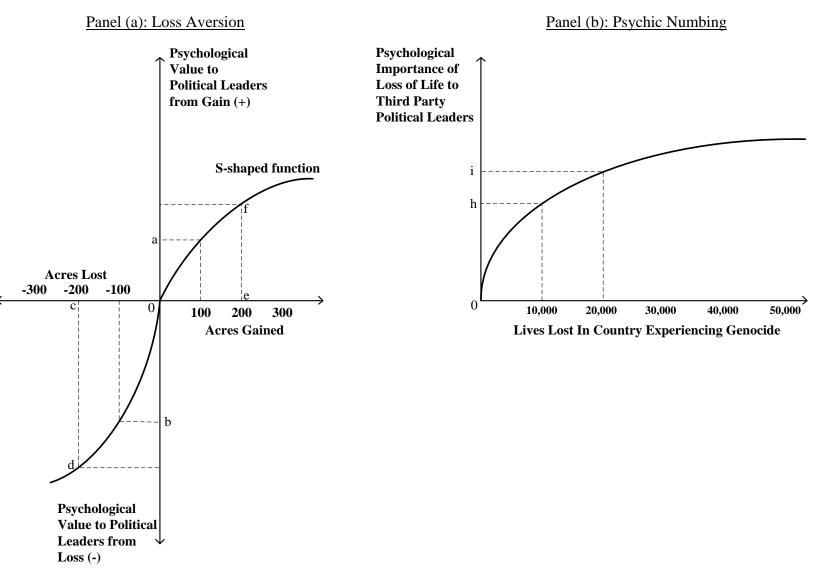science such as the importance of social and cultural context, existential threat and loss aversion,

FIGURE 6 – S-shaped curve from behavioral economics illustrating loss aversion and psychic numbing

Panel (b): Psychic Numbing

SOURCES: Adapted from Kahneman (2011, p. 183) and Slovic, *et al*. (2016)

cognitive and affective disabilities and psychic numbing, and the importance of status quo (or reference point) political power. I anticipate that over the coming decades there will be further integration and maybe even unification of the social and behavioral sciences regarding how people make choices, which in turn will help scholars and policymakers to better understand and prevent mass atrocities.

Meanwhile, in the world *right now*, mass atrocities are taking place. Moreover, future genocides and mass killings are being plotted *right now* in the minds of potential architects and perpetrators. The social sciences (and other disciplines) are stating very loudly that such atrocities will continue to occur until policymakers and citizens more generally come to fully appreciate that the rational and nonrational motivations for genocide and mass killing can be very strong in the minds of potential perpetrators and that the incentives for potential third parties to help victims can be stunted owing to human cognitive and affective limitations. The current challenge facing scholars, policymakers, and activists devoted to genocide prevention is how to integrate what has been learned about the causes of genocide, and will continue to be learned, into new and innovative policies to prevent genocide. Although the motives for genocide and mass killing remain strong in the world, we know more about the insidious nature and effects of such motives. One hopeful aspect of this otherwise disturbing reality is that *incentives can be changed*. Perhaps one day, the choice of genocide or mass killing can become incentivized to be as rare as it should be, which is "Never Again."

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