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Political Imagination and the Crime of Crimes: Coming to Terms with "Genocide" and "Genocide Blindness"

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Author: Mathias Thaler

Abstract:

This paper deals critically with the process of coming to terms with 'genocide'. It starts from the observation that conventional philosophical and legal approaches to capturing the essence of 'genocide' through an improved definition necessarily fail to adapt to the ever-changing nature of political violence. Faced with this challenge, the paper suggests that the contemporary debate on genocide (and its denial) should be complemented with a focus on transforming the perceptive and interpretive frameworks through which acts of violence are discussed in the public sphere. The main purpose of this paper is to contribute, from the vantage point of political theory, to this debate by offering a novel normative perspective on negative reactions to genocide. Hence, I argue that it is productive to speak of 'genocide blindness' in cases when the members of the public sphere are simply incapable of seeing an instance of violence as genocidal. To establish this claim, the paper introduces Ludwig Wittgenstein's reflections on 'aspect-seeing' so as to underline the importance of changing the way how political violence is perceived and interpreted. In a second step, the paper turns to María Pía Lara's theory of storytelling as a concrete mechanism for triggering and instituting this kind of change.

I. The conundrum around 'genocide': Common strategies of decontestation

Ever since Raphael Lemkin coined the term 'genocide' to capture the novelty of the horrors

of the Holocaust and of other crimes (particularly the Ottoman campaign against Anatolian

Armenians), legal theorists, practical philosophers and social scientists have been struggling

over the exact meaning of the term. (Cooper, 2007; Lemkin, 2008) Given the political

controversies around, and the internal tensions within the term itself, this struggle is not

astonishing. The political controversies around genocide can be explained by the fact that

states accused of planning to commit, or of committing, or of having committed genocide

are *de facto* outcast members of the international society, on whom economic, diplomatic

and military sanctions might be imposed.[1] Many states obfuscate their genocidal actions

once they are met with accusations. This strategy extends to both past and ongoing

genocides, as numerous examples from recent times show. For the latest case, just consider

the statement of Serbia's President, Nikolić, that there 'was no genocide in Srebrenica'

(Anon., 2012a) – a proclamation that contradicts all the available evidence, almost 20 years

after the massacres have occurred.

The main purpose of this paper is to enrich the argument around genocide by offering a

novel perspective on negative reactions to genocide. I will show that it is productive to speak

of 'genocide blindness' in cases when the members of the public sphere are simply incapable

of seeing an instance of violence as genocidal. This negative reaction ought to be held apart

from cases of 'genocide denial'. Normatively, the paper seeks to contribute to the

interdisciplinary discussion through a new dimension that highlights the perceptive and

interpretive frameworks to 'read' violence. I shall try to answer the question how we may

cultivate, and continue cultivating, the faculty to envisage instances of violence as

subsumable under the rubric of genocide. In this sense, the paper hopes to partake in the

wider 'genocide debate' (Beachler, 2011), which brings together a variety of actors, from engaged academics, to political stakeholders, to affected victims. Since this debate is first and foremost practically oriented towards the battle against genocide's social reality, the paper's theoretical claim should be understood as ancillary to this battle. According to the underlying vision of political theory, its primary function is 'not to talk about justice in the abstract but to *do* justice to the subject matter in the sense of understanding and clarifying the practices of justice.' (Gunnell, 2013, 99)

We can appreciate why a novel perspective on negative reactions to genocide is necessary once we scrutinize the internal tensions within the term. The established definition of 'genocide' in international law is far from being unequivocal. The standard codification in the UN *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (78 U. N. T. S. 277) defines genocide 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. (Schabas, 2009, 176)

Few definitions in international law have initiated that much disagreement among experts and laypersons alike. Almost every element of the definition has triggered fierce debates, from the kinds of groups protected by the *Convention*, to the precise understanding of 'intent

to destroy'. (May, 2010) Another well-known dilemma concerns the issue of what constitutes a 'part' of a national, ethnical, racial or religious group. (Power, 2002, 65) These quandaries have led one author to imaginatively propose to replace the legal term 'genocide' with the notion of 'atrocity crimes', which would encompass crimes against humanity, serious war crimes and violations of humanitarian law. (Scheffer, 2006) The standard codification of genocide is also increasingly at odds with public debates. David Luban, for example, asserts that the jurisprudential argument on the distinction between 'genocide' and 'crimes against humanity' is going into the opposite direction from the media controversies around ongoing violence. Examining the Darfur debate in 2007, he points out that the requirement to establish the perpetrators' intent to commit genocide might run counter to everyday discourse, where 'we think of genocide as deliberate annihilation of masses of civilians, regardless of the specific intention. That means that for non-lawyers […] the crime against humanity of exterminating civilian populations is genocide.' (Luban, 2006, 308)

Due to these issues, it has become evident that 'genocide' is as much a technical term in international law as it is a polemical term in public debates. People vehemently clash over the question whether a concrete instance of violence should be named 'genocide'. The public debate usually goes through cycles of contestation, where the past, the present and the future of a community are turned into battlefields. Consequently, several authors (Gallagher, 2009; Powell, 2007; Straus, 2001) have intimated that 'genocide' might be considered an 'essentially contested concept', whose meaning cannot be settled through conceptual analysis alone. (Freeden, 2004; Gallie, 1956) The discussion in section III will show that dubbing 'genocide' an essentially contested *concept* is not unproblematic. According to Wittgenstein's account of language-games, which underpins the argument in this paper, it is erroneous to assume that one stable, yet contested concept serves as the basis of the various

words we use to describe a phenomenon as 'genocide'. The confusion in the literature stems from the fuzzy distinction between concepts and words, which neither Gallie nor his followers have consistently delineated. Although I will expound more how Wittgenstein may assist us in overcoming this unfortunate confusion, suffice it here to say that certain *words* in political discourse – such as 'genocide' – have over time become '*characteristically* contested, but this is often because […] they have historically accrued a great deal of either approbation or disapprobation' (Gunnell, 2011, 132).[2]

These important reservations notwithstanding, it seems accurate to observe that, faced with the contestedness of 'genocide', theorists as well as practitioners have attempted to 'decontest' the word in various ways. Decontesting involves that a decision is taken to regulate and normalize the various uses of a word. (Freeden, 1998, 55–60) A decision of this kind is not only pressing within academic circles. For political discourse in general to function on a steady basis, it is vital that the meaning of the words in use is controlled. The two most common ways to engage in decontestation are (1) 'the attempt to attach very precise allocations of meanings to indeterminate concepts' and (2) the 'stipulative ascription of meaning to a term' (Freeden, 2005, 121). With regard to genocide, these two strategies translate into the following routes towards decontestation: many (analytical) philosophers grappling with the notion of 'genocide' interpret their role as one of settling the dispute over its ambiguity and indeterminacy. In other words, these philosophers do not only believe that decontestation can be fully achieved; for them, the assumption that 'genocide' might be characteristically contested proves to be fallacious. The goal, then, is to purify the word from its confusing elements such that an uncontestable core can finally materialize. Without going into the subtle variations in these attempts to dissect the word 'genocide', let us call this reckoning with the challenge of decontesting 'foundationalism'. (Herzog, 1985; Ripstein,

1987) I employ this term in the sense of grounding the obligation to prevent and punish genocide in a feature that makes the moral nature of genocide uniquely relevant. How this feature is characterized differs from one foundationalist account to another, but they are all similar insofar as they necessarily appeal to one such feature, or several such features. (Abed, 2006; Boghossian, 2010; Lee, 2009; Macleod, 2012)

This approach can be juxtaposed with another one that stipulates the term's meaning by referring to existing instruments in international law. In today's debate, lawyers and legal theorists often follow this route towards decontestation. While acknowledging the need to revise the UN definition, they deem the existing instruments as sufficient for the purpose of preventing and punishing genocide. I shall call this strategy 'legalism' (Shklar, 1986), wielding again a broad brush to paint a picture of rather diverse approaches. Legalism about genocide implies that the provisions in international law are construed as decoupled from politics. What is more, legalism characteristically expresses an 'excessive faith' (Posner, 2009, xii) in the rather weak institutions of international law.

Neither foundationalism nor legalism manages to cope with the challenge of coming to terms with 'genocide'. Their attempts to decontest 'genocide' are understandable as endeavors to defuse the internal tensions within the word, but they are futile in their overall ambitions. Given the unavoidably polemical character of the term, its radical openness to abuse, and its persistent exposure to cycles of contestation, it would be overly optimistic to ascribe the role of the final arbiter to either philosophical or legal discourse. This does, of course, not imply that there is no role at all to play for either philosophical or legal discourse in the wider genocide debate. However, this role is rather less comprehensive than either (analytical) philosophers or legal theorists suggest.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section II carves out in more detail the distinction between genocide denial and genocide blindness. Section III turns to Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of 'aspect-seeing' as an inspiration for rethinking the way in which 'genocide' ought to be broached. This appropriation of Wittgenstein, it should be mentioned at the outset, is rather limited in scope and therefore distinct from a full-fledged 'Wittgensteinian' approach to political theory. Section IV attempts to draw out the implications such a flexible approach to capturing 'genocide' might have. It focuses on the force of storytelling to continually change how we perceive and interpret violence.

II. From denial to blindness: Negative reactions to genocide

Let us begin by elaborating further on the distinction between two negative reactions to 'genocide'. The first reaction, genocide denial, can be described as the willful negation or misrepresentation of intersubjectively redeemable facts that prove the occurrence, in the past or in the present, of genocidal activities in a given territory. Hence, deniers proffer claims that reveal a sharp conflict with historical scholarship, even if they often mimic scholarly practices by purporting to put forward 'revisionist' accounts of past events. (Totten and Bartrop, 2008) Most participants in the debate on the definition of 'genocide' concentrate their efforts on the fight against various forms of denial. This is an intricate struggle along various frontlines, for Israel Charny has shown that denial comes in at least six different fashions, ranging from malevolent bigotry to the nihilistic depiction of violence as inevitable. (Charny, 2003) Although there are considerable differences between the diverse strategies to improve the definition of 'genocide', they are all similar insofar as their goal is to inhibit the willful negation or misrepresentation of genocide. In an open society governed

by freedom of speech, undermining genocide deniers requires first and foremost the development of historical scholarship.[3]

When dealing with an ongoing genocide, the situation looks rather different.[4] The reasons for not acknowledging the occurrence of a continuing genocide can often be traced back to a lack of political will on the part of those who might be capable of stopping the violence. Many have expressed the suspicion that the principal reason why the atrocities in Darfur were not officially recognized as genocidal was that the signatories to the UN *Convention* feared such recognition would trigger a duty to intervene. (Hagan and Rymond-Richmond, 2009; Udombana, 2005) On this account, the problem of any engagement with ongoing genocide is entrenched in the double standards of Western powers, for they regularly fail to live up to the 'responsibility to protect'. The case of Darfur has accentuated that this evolving doctrine of humanitarian intervention is highly contentious. (Bellamy, 2005; De Waal, 2007; Williams and Bellamy, 2005) Western powers are typically averse to calling some forms of violence genocidal when this contravenes their strategic interest. Viewed from this cosmopolitan perspective, the biggest challenge for preventing and punishing genocide is the hypocrisy of Western powers as 'norm carriers'. The flipside of this argument is that potential interveners will not hesitate to attach the label 'genocide' to a conflict if a military involvement is in their strategic interest. Mahmood Mamdani (2010) dubs this propensity the 'politics of naming'. Realist authors have highlighted that a hidden agenda can sometimes be identified behind attempts to designate atrocities as genocidal: Western powers will invoke humanity in order to conceal imperialist aspirations. Both the humanitarian intervention in Kosovo (Zolo, 2002) and the failed military involvement in Darfur (Mamdani, 2009) have been interpreted as interest-driven wars.

While it is undoubtedly true that political will, or rather the lack thereof, influences the official recognition of particular genocides, the conundrum around defining the word 'genocide' cuts deeper than either cosmopolitans or realists want to admit. As Henry Theriault has stressed (2010), capturing 'genocide' through a binding definition is such a difficult undertaking because any definition remains radically open to abuse: perpetrators and deniers will do everything in their power to ensure that a certain act of violence does not 'really' amount to genocide. They exploit the 'metaphysical indeterminacies' (Theriault, 2010, 495) in the UN definition to shield their actions from prosecution. While the denial of past and ongoing genocides is dominating media controversies, Theriault's argument about 'anticipatory denial' brings to the fore a more fundamental issue with any attempt to define genocide. Anticipatory denial occurs when perpetrators modify their planned actions so as to circumvent the charge of genocide. As an example of such a denial reaching out into the future, Theriault lists the widespread and systematic rape by Serbian soldiers in the war against the Bosnians during the 1990s. By using rape as weapon, the army temporarily succeeded in deflecting the charge of genocide. (Bellamy, 2012) Today, our perception differs: 'genocidal rape' is widely accepted as a valid description of the acts that had been taken during the wars in Ex-Yugoslavia; it is now consensually understood, both in international law and in public debates, that sexual violence plays an integral part in any genocide. (Eboe-Osuji, 2007; Miller, 2009; Schott, 2011) But this new way of seeing violence is a consequence of the ingeniously planned actions of perpetrators, who used the then-hegemonic definition of genocide to commit heinous crimes. Confronted with this dialectic between hegemonic definition and emerging violence, foundationalists and legalists insist on improving the definition in such a way that its blind spots are eliminated. However, the very mechanism through which any definition might inadvertently contribute to generating new forms of violence reveals the limitations of these attempts.

Let us now consider a different case. What about those who simply fail to perceive and to interpret an act of violence as genocidal? How should we judge their failure? Are they culpable to the same extent as Holocaust deniers, who deliberately distort historical records? Are we justified in attributing guilt to those observers who did not immediately recognize the genocidal character of mass rape during the war in Ex-Yugoslavia? And what about connecting anthropogenic climate change to genocide – is this conjecture just a bizarre exaggeration, typical of ecological hypersensitivity; or is it rather a prophetic portrayal of the fate of states such as Tuvalu, whose inhabitants might soon be expelled from their atoll-country, due to rising sea levels?[5]

If the social reality of genocide is constantly in flux, it might be excessively demanding to expect from the members of the public sphere to be sensitive to all new types of genocidal acts. Perhaps the members of the public sphere are not at all unwilling to see rape or climate change as genocidal, but their perceptive and interpretive frameworks – the apparatus through which they view the world – are ill-equipped to subsume these new forms of violence under the existing rubric. Accordingly, it might be the case that those who fail to perceive and interpret an act of violence as genocide are capable of grasping genocide in those cases that neatly map on the UN *Convention*. Yet, their over-all understanding of genocide is so restrictive that it cannot be extended to novel cases.

This is where we leave the realm of genocide denial. It is beyond any doubt that denial remains one of the most challenging issues in liberal democracies, where it is imperative to protect freedom of speech. But once we have realized that new forms of violence arise permanently, and that the search for an improved definition of genocide cannot stop this

emergence once and for all, we would be well advised to direct our attention to what I have called 'genocide blindness'. Genocide blindness, the second negative reaction, is related to, but not identical with, denial maneuvers in past, present or future conflicts. It is not a willful act at all, but rather a sort of affliction from which one can suffer, without necessarily having done anything to bring it on oneself. Genocide blindness denotes the inability to perceive and interpret an occurrence of violence as genocidal. Formulated like this, the meaning of 'genocide blindness' hinges on the exact sense of 'perceiving' and 'interpreting', which the following section will explore.

III. 'Seeing x as genocide': Wittgenstein on aspect-seeing

For us to devise an antidote to genocide blindness, we need to better grasp the nature of this affliction. What kind of blindness are we talking about here? Can there be a remedy to it? In order to answer these questions I will now mobilize Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy.[6] Before delving into the more specific discussion, I must clarify an important issue I have only gestured at in the introduction, namely how Wittgenstein's philosophy bears on the idea that certain concepts might be 'essentially contested'.[7] John G. Gunnell convincingly argues that the very idea of an 'essentially contested concept' is misguided from a Wittgensteinian point of view, because it invites the supposition that beneath the struggles over meaning one universal concept could be detected. Therefore, claiming that 'genocide' would be an essentially contested concept lures us into incorrectly believing that a conceptual core could emerge, if only the definitional struggles over the meaning subsided. However, Wittgenstein's account of language-games builds on the distinction between words and concepts, as Gunnell explains:

> The best short answer to the question of what constitutes concepts is to say that they are kinds of things designated and discriminated by various forms of linguistic usage.

[…] The crucial question of how words are related to concepts can be answered in part by saying that certain, but certainly not all, words refer to concepts, and this is basically equivalent to saying that such words refer to classes of things and are used to talk about particular instances of those things. (Gunnell, 2011, 136, 138)

From this perspective, the notion of 'essentially contested concepts' has limited purchase, for it is the word, and not the concept of 'genocide', whose meaning is disputed. Still, Wittgenstein's philosophy sheds light on the topic of this paper because it exemplifies a critical type of inquiry that 'leaves everything as it is' (Gunnell, 2013, 84). Since the wider genocide debate, which involves engaged academics, political stakeholders and affected victims, cannot be settled through foundationalist or legalist endeavors to decontest the term, such a form of inquiry commences by openly admitting that genocide primarily constitutes a practical, not a theoretical, challenge that contemporary societies around the globe must confront. Surpassing the internal tensions within the term 'genocide' will do little to comprehend the social reality of genocide, which remains, as we have seen in section II, constantly in flux. To draw once again on Gunnell, what comes first are the 'practices of justice', which political theory then needs to reconstruct. I will submit that one possible avenue for probing these practices in the context of genocide is to interrogate Wittgenstein's remarks on 'aspect-seeing'. The following engagement with Wittgenstein should not, however, be mistaken for a full-fledged 'Wittgensteinian' approach to political theory: for this, its purpose is simply too restricted. My use of Wittgenstein is primarily motivated by the intuition that 'aspect-seeing' has ramifications for the genocide debate, which have not yet been studied.

Commentators (Day and Krebs, 2010; Glock, 1996) point out that the most thorough exposition of aspect-seeing can be discovered in what has earlier been considered the second

part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. (Wittgenstein, 2009) In this text, Wittgenstein uses 'picture-objects' – such as the famous duck-rabbit – to explain how an aspect of something can 'dawn' on us, how we may, from one moment to another, recognize the aspect of something. When looking at the duck-rabbit we suddenly perceive it as a rabbit and then as a duck. Does new information impel us to 'see something as something'? Or is it our mind that tricks us into perceiving things the way we perceive them? Wittgenstein's approach to 'aspect perception' locates this activity between normal seeing and interpreting or thinking: it is 'half visual experience, half thought' (Wittgenstein, 2009, 207e). Thus, aspect-seeing entails an active imagination that normal seeing does not require:

> The concept of an aspect is related to the concept of imagination. In other words, the concept 'Now I see it as . . .' is related to 'Now I am imagining that'. Doesn't it take imagination to hear something as a variation on a particular theme? […] Seeing an aspect and imagining are subject to the will. There is such an order as 'Imagine this!', and also, 'Now see the figure like this!'; but not 'Now see this leaf green!'.
>
> (Wittgenstein, 2009, 224e)

A crucial point in Wittgenstein's remarks is that aspect perception is not a purely subjective activity: it can be communicated and shared with others, and thus resembles interpretation. (Gunnell, 2013, 88) Indeed, some commentators have maintained that aspect perception opens up the possibility for 'certain moments of intimacy' (Baz, 2000, 99) with other people. Wittgenstein claims that aspect-seeing is paradoxically both similar to, and distinct from, normal seeing. (Hester, 1966; Wittgenstein, 2009, 207e) This is illustrated through an elaborate discussion of the opposite of aspect-seeing, namely 'aspect blindness'. It is vital to notice that Wittgenstein uses this term in two different manners: Aspect blindness is, on the one hand, the 'inability to experience aspect-dawning' (Glock, 1996, 39). This means that an aspect-blind person cannot perceive the change from one aspect to another, but she can at

least see one of the image's aspects: either the duck or the rabbit. On the other hand, Wittgenstein also makes an instructive comparison with the 'lack of a "musical ear"' (Wittgenstein, 2009, 225e) in order to elucidate the particular deficiency that is aspect blindness. Thus, aspect blindness may also occur when a person cannot perceive any aspects at all. Such a person would be incapable of seeing either the duck or the rabbit in the image, perceiving instead just a randomly shaped line and a dot.

In what ways can political theory benefit from this account of 'seeing something as something'? Several authors – out of which I select two, whose interpretations are particularly in tune with this paper's ambition – have sought to appropriate Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect-seeing for their specific projects.[8] Aletta Norval, our first interlocutor, attempts to use Wittgensteinian insights to make sense of 'democratic identification' in transitional moments, taking as a starting observation her personal experience whilst voting in the first free elections in South Africa in 1994. (Norval, 2006) She raises a hard question: What allows people to see themselves as democratic subjects, when a new regime comes to power after a period of authoritarian rule? Against deliberative theorists, Norval maintains that to answer this question one must explore fundamental processes of identification. Founding and transitional moments necessarily induce a break in the 'political grammars' we utilize to account for ourselves – and deliberative theorists are at a loss when it comes to dealing with such disruptions. The substitution of 'apartheid' with 'equality' would count as an example of such a transformation in political grammar. The point about grammars enabling a change in subject formation is that they must achieve two goals at the same time: to articulate a novel framework for citizens to interpret themselves as democrats and to remain intelligible to those who have not been democrats before. (Norval, 2006, 243)

In Norval's reading, Wittgenstein's exploration of aspect-seeing is relevant for democratic identification insofar as it captures the puzzling effect that any political transition or founding moment generates: the exhilarating surprise over what is new is immediately accompanied by the sobering realization that not much has actually changed. (Norval, 2006, 246) This effect is important because it assures that the 'new democrats' still consider themselves as the same persons as before. Just as with the duck-rabbit, the change in subject formation induced by a political transition or founding moment marks a discontinuity with the past, without necessarily following a singular rupture. Norval's depiction of the democratic subject is therefore decidedly 'anti-heroic' (Norval, 2006, 245–246): transformations do not necessarily rely on exceptional individuals alone; they often depend on incremental alterations in ethical habits and practices.

Norval's interpretation of Wittgenstein is enlightening because she draws a further distinction between 'aspect-dawning' and 'aspect change'. While admitting that, strictly speaking, this distinction cannot be found in Wittgenstein's oeuvre, Norval argues that we find in his work the resources for parsing the first instantiation of a new political grammar ('dawning') from the continuous efforts to keep novel forms of identification alive ('change'). Although the two moments are obviously intertwined with each other, they necessitate separate activities from the citizens:

> If democracy is conceived as a never-ending struggle, then the mode of subjectivity supporting it must be one that can take account of this. Hence the emphasis on a reengagement and reactivation of democratic practices. As we know, the simple repetition of practices, while necessary, may in the long run fail to sustain democratic identification. (Norval, 2006, 249)

David Owen, our second interlocutor, adds to the debate about Wittgenstein's impact on political theory through his innovative concept of 'aspectival captivity' (Owen, 2002). In an essay on the relationship between genealogy and Critical Theory, Owen juxtaposes 'aspectival' with 'ideological captivity'. The difference between these two forms of being held captive can be substantiated in the following manner:

> The primary feature of ideological captivity can be elucidated by reference to the concept of 'false consciousness'. […] The main, contrasting, feature of aspectival captivity is that […] the condition of captivity is independent of the truth or falsity of the beliefs held by the agent. (Owen, 2002, 217)

Owen argues that ideological and aspectival captivity each require different forms of critical engagement. Overcoming ideological captivity calls for employing the tools of ideology critique in order to instigate processes of agential self-reflection that uncover and dispel 'false consciousness'. The focus in ideology critique lies, thus, on the agent's own capacity to fathom that her prior beliefs were factually false and in need of correction. In the case of aspectival captivity, on the other hand, liberation will follow another path. The tools for liberation from aspectival captivity can be extracted from the Nietzschean and Foucauldian project of genealogy. From this description, it is evident that, while both ideology critique and genealogy contribute to 'enlightenment and emancipation' (Owen, 2002, 227), each proposes distinct ways in which liberation can be realized. Thus, genealogy does not aim at revealing the falsity of beliefs, but rather seeks to fulfill several interrelated tasks:

> (a) it identifies a picture which holds us captive […],
>
> (b) this account involves a redescription of this picture which contrasts it with another way of seeing the issue in order to free us from captivity to this picture,
>
> (c) it provides an account of how we have become held captive by this picture […] (Owen, 2002, 224)

Scrutinizing different contexts, in which practical reasoning and action take place, Norval and Owen emphasize the importance of 'seeing things aright'. Norval's distinction between 'aspect-dawning' and 'aspect change' as well as Owen's notion of 'aspectival captivity' are the two contributions to the massive secondary literature on Wittgenstein that are most illuminating when exploring 'genocide blindness'.

IV. Neither sacred nor banal: Historical precedent and political imagination

In the last part of the paper, I shall turn from diagnosis to cure. The main pointer in Wittgenstein is that aspect blindness, and by implication genocide blindness, derives from a deficiency in imaginative powers. It is not simply a failure to see 'something as something', it is also a failure to think and reflect appropriately. When making (selective) use of Wittgenstein's observations to discuss genocide, we therefore ought to start by recalling the double meaning of aspect blindness. Genocide blindness, I have argued, pertains to the first semantic layer, that is, the inability to perceive aspect-dawning. A 'genocide-blind' person is, thus, not someone who cannot see any violent act at all as genocidal. While it might be the case that some people are 'genocide-blind' in this extreme sense, I am more intrigued by the difficulties that arise when people cannot experience a change in what ought to count as genocide. The crucial concern, then, is: How may we cultivate, and continue cultivating, the faculty to envisage instances of violence as subsumable under the rubric of genocide?

In answering this question, we should again look into the case of 'genocidal rape'. It is fair to assume that not everybody who failed to see the Serbian campaign of mass rape as genocidal was a ruthless denier. Rather, it is plausible to suggest that at least some of those who have been blind to the genocidal character of mass rape firmly oriented themselves on the existing definition, which at that point did not cover mass rape. This fixation made it in

turn impossible for them to perceive and interpret the crimes in such a way that they were subsumable under the rubric of genocide. This negative reaction to 'genocidal rape' does not involve the willful negation or misrepresentation of intersubjectively redeemable facts about genocide.

In holding denial apart from blindness, I have not yet determined whether the cause for a particular case of blindness is ideological or aspectival captivity. However, drawing on Owen's account, it is palpable that both ideological and aspectival captivity might be causing genocide blindness. People who fail to see an instance of violence as genocidal might be under the spell of false consciousness, and therefore be victims of 'ideological captivity'. Deniers might manipulate and misinform them about the specificity of the violent acts so as to divert attention from the atrocities. In this case, what is needed to cure this affliction is ideology critique of the type described by Owen: enlightenment and emancipation through the self-reflection of the actors. But it is likewise possible to speak of aspectival captivity when engaging with cases of genocide blindness. Following this line of thought, a particular perspective on what acts should count as genocide blinds those who fail to perceive a new instance of violence as genocidal. Then people are simply unable to extend the label 'genocide' to cases that do not fit the hegemonic definition. In this situation, enlightenment and emancipation will call for the remedy of offering another way of seeing things.[9]

How could we succeed in devising such a remedy? I have already hinted at the fact that Wittgenstein offers a clue through the assertion that a deficiency in imaginative powers lies at the heart of 'aspect blindness'. With respect to genocide, my proposal is that enhancing political imagination can provide a rejoinder to the challenge of 'seeing x as genocide'. The

focus on political imagination attempts to shift the debate, away from its narrow concern with improving the definition of what should count as genocide, and towards the perceptive and interpretive frameworks through which violence is viewed. What, then, is political imagination, and how does it bear on genocide blindness? The cultivation of political imagination hinges on narratives of past human suffering that change the perceptive and interpretive frameworks of the public. Such narratives disrupt the way in which instances of violence are normally discussed, and thereby contribute to liberating the members of the public sphere from aspectival captivity. Liberation of this kind can only be achieved if the members of the public sphere are capable of drawing lessons of moral learning from the past.

In submitting that storytelling can transform the public's perceptive and interpretive frameworks to become more sensitive to new forms of violence, I follow María Pía Lara's 'post-metaphysical' discussion of evil. (Lara, 2007) This account is heavily indebted to Hannah Arendt's notion of storytelling as disclosure. (Arendt, 1998, 175–199) While it would be fruitful to reconstruct Arendt's traces, as numerous publications have illustrated (Benhabib, 1990; Disch, 1993; Luban, 1983; Speight, 2011), I will concentrate on Lara's appropriation of storytelling for a simple reason: her ideas about how we may learn from the past are more neatly attuned to the spirit of this paper. Yet, my turn to Lara does not imply that this would be the only useful account of storytelling. Neo-Hegelians, such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) and Charles Taylor (1989), have developed distinctively narrative approaches to ethics. What sets Lara apart from these neo-Hegelians is that she ties storytelling to collective politics, while both MacIntyre and Taylor associate narratives with the constitution of individual selfhood.[10]

Lara's suggestion is that narratives presented in various media – from intimate autobiographical testimonies to big screen blockbusters – help societies in their efforts to grapple with the past. Storytelling can unveil the historical conditions of evildoing and of human suffering in ways that academic scholarship alone cannot: it may trigger large-scale 'aspect-dawning', in Norval's sense. Powerful stories force the readers and viewers to grasp violence in a different light. This means that certain narratives initiate societal learning processes as they impel the members of the public sphere to reflect on their community's past in a critical vein. Lara insists on the lessons to be drawn from particular events that exemplify evil:

> My theory of reflective judgment focuses on the notion that disclosive language is an operation of opening up spaces for moral learning (i.e., seeing things differently). In this kind of exercise of judgment there is a conceptual connection between our historical understanding of an atrocity as a particular action (provided by different narratives) and the way we name it with a morally disclosive term. (Lara, 2007, 10)

This passage shows how Lara's account of moral learning through storytelling might beneficially inform the debate around genocide blindness. Powerful stories construct a 'moral filter' (Lara, 2007, 27), through which the history of atrocities can be structured. These stories seek to shape the reader' and viewers' imagination by devising a sharpened lens for reading and viewing the world, and by drafting an innovative vocabulary for talking about it. Lara cites the example of the word 'Holocaust' in order to demonstrate the strengths of her narrative take on evil. It took more than 20 years for the term to establish itself, through historical research into the murder of European Jews, but also through survivors' biographical testimonials and later through divulgation in commercially successful movies and TV series. As a neologism it emitted a 'semantic shock' that stirred the imagination of the public to see the atrocities in a new light. Although far from being uncontroversial, the

term 'Holocaust' is today widely used to describe the Nazi crimes.[11] Arguably, the term

helped to account not only for the historical specificity of those crimes, but it also widened

the scope of public debates to such an extent that evils, which might previously have been

deemed unimaginable, became effable.

The example of the word 'Holocaust' stresses that the most effective way to modify

perceptive and interpretive frameworks is, paradoxically, to foster a continuous engagement

with historical instances of violence. This is why Lara concedes that narratives of human

suffering always have a *telos*: to enable 'learning from catastrophes' (Habermas, 1998). The

narratives thus create a link between a community's past, its present and its future. Such a

link sparks a transformation within the fabric of a community, starting what Norval calls

'aspect change'. Therefore, societal learning only occurs when the momentous effect of

'aspect-dawning' leads to a broader pattern of 'aspect change'. But this summoning of past

instances of violence is under threat by two common developments that can be witnessed in

many controversies: any semantic shock, not only the one induced by the term 'Holocaust',

may suffer from either sacralization or banalization. (Lara, 2007, 164) The danger is that the

semantic shock soon solidifies into a paradigm that preempts the exercise of judgment and

closes the horizon of public debates. Once a specific event, like the Holocaust, is turned into

such a paradigm, commentators quickly take a further step and either belittle any other

instance of violence when compared to the Holocaust (thereby sacralizing the Holocaust), or

they assimilate any instance of violence to the Holocaust (thereby banalizing the Holocaust).

Both uses of the Holocaust, or of any other specific event, are problematic because they

stifle the public debate about concrete acts of violence. One upshot of this observation is that

we should abandon the 'quest for a sort of total equivalence' (Bloxham, 2009, 31) between

atrocities and the Holocaust, which haunts historical scholarship even today. (Moses, 2002; Moshman, 2001; Stone, 2004)[12]

Still, the perils of sacralizing and banalizing are here to stay: Whenever we refer to a specific event from the past to exemplify evildoing and human suffering, we run the risk of generating a paradigm that becomes detached from subtle engagement. Eschewing all references to the past does not solve the problem since seeing things differently is premised on the wager that the exposure to historical experiences renders the members of the public sphere more susceptible to future modifications in the social reality of violence. If we subscribe to the premise that narratives put the members of the public sphere in a better position to keep track with the fluid nature of violence, it follows that we must tackle the question of what characterizes a proper lesson from history. Lara clarifies her view by stating that powerful narratives instantiate a conversation between the author(s) and the public. (Lara, 2007, 12, 38) It is, hence, characteristic of these stories that they actually reach and rattle their audience. What is more, the public must respond to the semantic shock in such a way that the story is taken up and vindicated. This implies that an agreement on the validity of the representation, however minimal, ought to arise between the narrator(s) and the audience. Although such an agreement cannot be conceptualized in generic terms, it is based on the idea that narratives are validated through "situated impartiality" (Disch, 1993, 682–688).

Up to this point, the discussion of political imagination took place on a fairly high level of abstraction. In order to flesh out the operation of storytelling with more substance I now want to highlight the multifaceted appeals to the Srebrenica massacre in the debate around the conflicts in Libya and Syria. In 2011, several pundits, both from liberal and conservative

media outlets, drew strong parallels between these two conflicts in order to justify military intervention in Libya. (Preston, 2011; Simms, 2011) With regard to Syria, Srebrenica was once again called upon in 2012 – with exactly the same arguments, creating the same sense of urgency – to move the international community towards endorsing its 'responsibility to protect'. (Anon., 2012b; Korski, 2012; Lister, 2012) This indiscriminate invocation of a specific event shows that 'Srebrenica' has, at least in these controversies, forfeited its disclosive function and deteriorated into a deceptive vignette. 'Srebrenica' has thus become a sacred memory site in the sense that its mere mentioning is supposed to truncate deliberations.

Does this mean that all the comparisons between an act of mass atrocity and Srebrenica are treacherous? Of course not. While space constraints prevent me from launching on a nuanced interpretation of these stories, it is not difficult to find examples for narratives that have led to 'aspect-dawning' in the public's eyes. There are several representations of the war in Ex-Yugoslavia that have immensely broadened our understanding of violence. As two observers remark,

> (c)ivil society has been a key agent of public debate around issues of war crimes and justice in BiH with individual intellectuals, journalists, and civil society activists often taking the lead on these sensitive subjects. Documentaries, films, and art projects have provided alternative avenues for stimulating public debate on dealing with the past. (Rangelov and Theros, 2010, 365)

Internationally acclaimed movies, such as *Grbavica* (Zbanic, 2006), have cast the Serbian campaign of mass rape in the most differentiated light, emphasizing its destructive effects on the Bosnian society's present and future.[13] A film like *Grbavica* might indeed manage to transform the viewers' perceptive and interpretive frameworks as it makes anything but the

recognition of mass rape's genocidal character appear impossible. Despite, or perhaps because of, its taboo-shattering plot, the film has been watched by more than 100.000 people in Bosnia alone, and has given rise to a civil society initiative whose objective is the acknowledgment of reparations claims for rape victims. (Fischer, 2007, xi–xii)

A critic might object to this account of storytelling that it leaves far too many issues in the uncertain, betting instead on the disclosive function of narratives.[14] I have not elucidated with any precision how an agreement between the author(s) and the public might surface. Neither have I identified a criterion that will render some stories more legitimate than others. There lurks also the danger that the narrative approach might produce a culture of 'genocide hypersensitivity', in which the public sees genocides everywhere. In short, I have not grappled with the normative foundations of the narrative approach. Such foundations are indispensable, the critic might insist, because the appeal to stories as such remains indeterminate: they may in favorable circumstances foster a sense of respect and empathy, but in other moments they may actually instigate genocide. It is well documented, for instance, that the Rwandan genocide was incited by hate speech, mercilessly pitting Hutus against Tutsis. (Gourevitch, 1998; Schabas, 2000) Radio stations and newspapers fanned the fires of racialized hatred by telling stories about malicious 'Tutsi cockroaches'. Nazi propaganda, too, depended heavily on anti-Semitic narratives, disseminated through a thriving cinema and print industry, of Jews as the 'enemy within the state'. (Herf, 2006) If both *Grbavica* and *Jud Süß*, Veit Harlan's infamous movie from 1940, recount evildoing and human suffering – the Jew Oppenheimer in *Jud Süß* rapes a German girl, and tortures her husband – how may we normatively distinguish them?

Whereas it is true that Lara's model cannot supply us with any guarantee that storytelling will succeed in doing what it promises (Verdeja, 2009), this should not immediately send us on a quest for normative foundations – if by this we mean some form of transcendental, universal, a-historical morality. We require no 'ethical theory' to fathom that Hutu and Nazi propaganda pursued only one goal, namely to indoctrinate people so that they are turned into willing accomplices of murderous plans.[15] The evildoing and human suffering depicted in these stories was purely instrumental, its purpose was to instill fear, resentment and fury in the audience. In contradistinction, stories that facilitate processes of learning from catastrophes do not proselytize their audience. Rather, these stories always remain open to deliberation and dispute. They should, of course, strive to elicit agreement from the public, but they must abstain from imposing their message with absolute assurance.

All we need to normatively distinguish *Grbavica* from *Jud Süß*, then, is the capacity to uncover manipulative storytelling. In Kantian terminology, such storytelling treats the audience merely as a means to an end. Non-manipulative storytelling, on the other hand, seeks to persuade its public, yet it refrains from coercing it into espousing a certain message.[16] Another way of expressing this idea would be to observe with Lisa Disch (1993, 684) that a 'skillful storyteller teaches her readers to see *as* she does, not *what* she does, affording them the "intoxicating" experience of seeing from multiple perspectives but leaving them with the responsibility to undertake the critical task of interpretation for themselves'.

In reply to the critic, I would thus contend that the narrative approach is ultimately grounded in the respect for the dignity of the stories' addressees. Apart from this proviso, storytelling advances 'without banisters', to invoke Arendt's memorable phrase. It remains an unfinished

project that must go on so long as human suffering is experienced. However, there simply is no viable alternative to this project if the aim is to combat 'genocide blindness'. This brings us back to the relationship between denial and blindness. From what has been said so far, it should be clear that both negative reactions to genocide are linked to each other. Deniers will have easy play if they advance their claims and pseudo-claims in an environment dominated by genocide blindness. Conversely, deniers may 'imprison' the members of the public sphere within a distorted vision of the world through the use of misleading narratives. Therefore, my argument does not detract from the struggle against genocide denial, but rather complements it with a concern for remedying genocide blindness.

As we have seen in section II, the reasons for ignoring the occurrence of genocide are varied, from the intentional schemes of revisionists to the weakness of political will. In this context, targeting blindness can occupy a seminal place in altering the environment within which the genocide debate is held. The hope is that, if the members of the public sphere become sensitivized to emerging forms of violence through storytelling, they will gradually form a critical community of spectators, who might be able to exert pressure on political stakeholders. Such an 'ocular' community would serve as a robust bulwark against efforts to shirk the responsibility to stop atrocities.[17] While this paper has not directly engaged with the politics of naming, it has set itself a more modest goal: underscoring the centrality of non-manipulative storytelling for the multiple practices of justice, which together constitute the fight against genocide. One of those practices, I have argued, is enacted by those who shake the public with narratives of human suffering. In contrast with foundationalist and legalist propositions, the emphasis on cultivating political imagination leaves no room for the notion that the practical struggle over genocide can be resolved through theoretical means alone.

Rather, it exposes, less ambitiously, yet surely more realistically, how complex the process of coming to terms with genocide is. No banisters – but also no false promises.

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Endnotes

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[1] For a deflationary position regarding the practical effect of the word 'genocide' see: Glanville, 2009.

[2] Throughout this paper I intend to use 'term' and 'word' synonymously, and keep them apart from 'concept'. This terminology reflects the concerns expressed by Wittgenstein about many uses of 'concept', which are summarized at the beginning of section III.

[3] From academic circles, the debate regularly spills over into the judicial arena. Sometimes genocide deniers take recourse to challenging the soundness of historical scholarship in the courtroom, as it has recently been the case in *Irving v. Lipstadt*, with its devastating ruling on David Irving's ruminations. (Evans, 2001)

[4] I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for urging me to clarify this point.

[5] For a very strong (and disputed) equation of 'holocaust denial' and 'climate change denial' see: Tomkiewicz, 2011. For a more refined appraisal of environmental factors of violence see: Homer-Dixon, 1999. For the case of Tuvalu see: Barnett, 2003. For another position arguing that genocide can only be fought effectively if its social, economic and environmental pre-conditions – massive global inequality and predatory capitalism – are eradicated see: Levene, 2004.

[6] The idea that Wittgenstein may teach political theorists something crucial is not new. Following in the footsteps of Hanna Pitkin, several authors have attempted to recover Wittgenstein's potential for exploring diverse political phenomena. See: Holt, 1997; Mouffe, 2000; Pitkin, 1972; Pleasants, 1999; Tully, 1989; Zerilli, 1998. A recent book (Robinson, 2009) even seeks to systematize political theory's reception of Wittgenstein in general.

[7] The following passages owe their existence to the perceptive and constructive criticism of one of the reviewers. I am very grateful for having been directed towards a better understanding of Wittgenstein in the context of 'essentially contested concepts'.

[8] Many of these authors take their cues from Stanley Cavell's influential interpretation. (Cavell, 1999) Cavell refers at several points to Wittgenstein's discussion of 'aspect-seeing'. (Cavell, 1981, 36; 2007, 282–283) For a very interesting use of 'aspect-seeing' in the analysis of 'liberty' see: Havercroft, 2003. For a feminist appropriation of Wittgenstein's reflections see: Heyes, 2007, 15–37.

[9] In what follows, I will use 'genealogy' and 'narratives' as largely synonymous. This is obviously not fully compatible with Owen's account of liberation from aspectival captivity. However, for my purpose it is important to emphasize the different fora in which 'emancipation and enlightenment' can occur. Storytelling in precisely Lara's sense appears to be the most promising manner to instil citizens with 'a new way of seeing things'.

[10] On the relation between individual and collective dimensions of storytelling see: Appiah, 2005, 22–23.

[11] Some scholars prefer to use the Hebrew word 'Shoah' instead of 'Holocaust'. For a comprehensive account of both terms see: Petrie, 2000.

[12] For a recent contribution to the Holocaust debate that triggered a semantic shock, consider for example Timothy Snyder's concept of 'bloodlands'. (Snyder, 2010)

[13] See: Husanovic, 2009; Koebel, 2009; Todorova, 2011.

[14] In fact, both reviewers as well as the journal's Editors have pressed me to clarify my position vis-à-vis the narrative approach's normative foundations. I wish to thank them for their perceptive remarks.

[15] On the futility of (some types of) ethical theory for moral reasoning see: Williams, 1981, ix–x.

[16] To be sure, powerful stories will often come perilously close to proselytizing, especially when their objective is to move the imagination of the public – the media frenzy around the *Kony 2012* campaign, for example, testifies to the thin line separating manipulative from non-manipulative storytelling. (Cadwalladr, 2013; Waldorf, 2012)

[17] This notion of a critical community of spectators could be further elaborated with reference to Jeffrey Green's model of plebiscitary democracy (2010).