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Against the Crime of Sociocide

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Genocide is legitimately thought of as a kind of madness, an application of clannish or "völkish" hysteria inspired by xenophobia and nationalist ideology. Genocide first became a crime in international law in December 1946, when the General Assembly of the new United Nations Organization voted a resolution concerning it. This was thanks to the tireless efforts of Raphael Lemkin (1900-1959), a young Polish Jew turned jurist inspired by the mass killings of Armenians between 1915 and 1918.

Lemkin's campaign to gain acceptance for the notion of genocide—a word he invented—was enabled by the Nazi "holocaust". The slaughter of political dissidents, gypsies, handicapped people and, especially, Jews and other ethnic "minorities" led to the passage of the United Nations "Convention on the prevention of the crime of genocide" on 9 December 1948 and then its adoption on 12 January 1951 after ratification by enough member states. The United States belatedly ratified it only in 1988, initially because of the legal apartheid in some Southern states and then because of its exactions in Vietnam and elsewhere.

In spite of the universal opprobrium aroused by genocide, efforts to stop it have been futile. On the contrary, the idea of genocide has been turned against the original purpose. Accusations of genocide are now used as humanistic justifications for military intervention by imperialist powers for purposes having little to do with the safeguard of peoples or societies.

I am convinced that genocide now must be recognized as mainly a means of committing another, and even more fundamental, international crime—"sociocide".

The ultimate aim of sociocide is not the physical destruction of peoples, or of a loosely defined culture, or of a State, as it is sometimes confusedly said, but rather the destruction of the relationships between the different groups constituting a society. This is what governments of the United States have done in Iraq, what Western governments encouraged in ex-Yugoslavia, what the Zionists did in Palestine. If "ethnic cleansing" in all its physically and culturally destructive forms can contribute to sociocide—the destruction of social bonds between diverse groups—the way is clear for colonial or imperialist domination and exploitation of a region, whether it be for expropriation of the land, exploitation of its economic resources or occupation of its strategic location.

Examples of sociocide

The deliberate destruction of societies began in the sixteenth century as a way of ensuring European colonial domination in the Americas and elsewhere. Although the ideology of racism justified the practice, extermination of peoples was only incidental to it.

As late as 1885, at the international congress in Berlin convened for the purpose, the sub-Saharan African continent was subjected to the same treatment. Boundaries were arbitrarily drawn between different territorial spheres of Western influence so as to create antagonisms between different indigenous cultural and language groups among Africans, thus facilitating European control.

The breaking-up of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires followed the same principle, but it was expressed as a progressive process of "national self-determination." Although the then dominant "nation states"—Britain, France, The United States, Germany, Italy, etc.—had been created by the suppression of cultural particularities, their promotion elsewhere was a good method for eliminating rival power blocs.

The various peace treaties following the First World War—the Treaties of Versailles, Le Trianon,

Saint-Germain-en-Laye and Neuilly" did just this. Borders were redrawn so as to create a number of small states, all of which would be weakened by internal divisions as different "nationalities" fought each other as they defended and promoted their individual "identities." "National self determination," instead of overcoming nationalist passions, contributed to them by unleashing the desire to territorially aggrandize a "national homeland" and to exclude alien "minorities". Continuing to live together in harmony and the cultivation of mutual accommodation in the same geographical region was no longer considered rational or realistic behavior.

The same ploy was used in the Middle East, first to incite the "Arabs" to fight with the British against the Turks, and then to carve up the region into several artificial states over which Britain, France and, eventually, the United States dominated. The imperialist allies accomplished all this with perfect cynicism, if little realism. Although a few duplicitous agents, such as T.E. Lawrence ("of Arabia"), may have had moral qualms about misleading the Arabs, others had no such compunctions. Statecraft was used to re-juggle populations, regardless of the consequences. As Ronald Storrs, first military governor (in fact, civil administrator) of Jerusalem ruefully said, the Zionists would help constitute a little Jewish Ulster in Palestine, and thereby facilitate British control over the strategically important region. Here again, nationalist passions were aroused on all sides in the interests of neo-colonial control.

All of which leads us to the creation of the state of Israel and the institutionalization of "ethnic cleansing." Since the publication of Ilan Pappé's book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2006) there is no doubt that the destruction of Palestinian society was the paramount objective of Zionist planners. For them, the greatest problem was the mutual accommodation still existing between Jews and Palestinians (including, of course, Jewish Palestinians and even some Zionists). David Ben Gurion and his collaborators meticulously planned the expulsion of upwards of a million people, but they could not announce the plan to local Jewish officials in the cities or in kibbutzim who wished to live in peace and harmony with all established residents. The "judaization" of Palestine"the creation of the state of Israel"required the destruction of Palestinian society.

The irony of the situation is that, since the creation of the Israeli state, objections to its nature raise the cry of "the destruction of Israel," implying that the Jews will be pushed into the sea. In fact, the destruction of Israel as an institutionalized juridical entity is the only possible way of achieving social harmony in the region of historical Palestine. The right of habitation must exist for residents, but not extended to specific groups so as to reinforce the exclusion of other groups, as the Zionist movement and then the state of Israel have done. Only by, on the one hand, ending the infamous Israeli "Law of Return"allowing everyone considered a Jew to obtain Israeli citizenshipand, on the other hand, the creation of non-confessional political institutions, can lead to the re-emergence of a truly cohesive society in the area.

The destruction of economic and civil infrastructures in Iraq is also a clear example of sociocide. The controversy over the estimation of deaths in Iraq caused by the US led war and occupation"in studies made by the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University concluding that by 2006 there had been close to one million deaths"is really about how to characterize the nature of the war. With such high figures the war can be considered genocidal.

However, once again, the ultimate objective has not been to kill Iraqis. The strategy has been to destroy civilian and economic infrastructures. The old "divide and rule" methods are simply preceded by those of "shock and awe". Control over the region requires the intentional creation or exacerbation of inter-societal tensions so as to shatter social and cultural bonds or affinities. This is a sociocidal policy.

Towards a definition of sociocide

We must go beyond the idea of genocide as formulated originally by Rafael Lemkin, and struggle against the crime of sociocide.

Lemkin's difficult but successful campaign to define and then gain acceptance for the idea of genocide was a major accomplishment. However, it is clear that his work emerged out of a period when nationalism was so strong that even the notion of genocide tended to reinforce nationalistic tendencies.

For example, even the genocide of the Armenians has tended to focus on one large group and to obscure the fate of other victims of the Turkish state. In addition to the one and a half million Armenian victims, there were also 400,000 Assyrians killed. The Kurdish population has also suffered in this regard. The objective of the Turkish government was to eliminate whoever was considered potentially subversive, regardless of their specific characteristics.

The massive population transfers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries "generally facilitated, condoned or ignored by Western governments" are collaterally genocidal, but mainly sociocidal.

A major step in going beyond the concept of genocide was taken by Robert Jaulin, the French anthropologist, who refined the concept of ethnocide in 1970 in his book *La Paix blanche. Introduction à l'ethnocide* (The White Peace : Introduction to Ethnocide), as yet unpublished in English.

Jaulin attempts to explain the mechanisms by which a dominant culture moves to eradicate others and thus "universalize" its own in the supposed interest of greater social harmony. The title of his book is derived from the fact that, in practice, this meant imposing the culture of the "whites" through the elimination of all others, considered to be inimical to "civilization." However important as a term and concept, "ethnocide" is also too limited in the larger geo-political context in which sociocides are fomented and carried out.

The word "sociocide" exists, as a brief consultation of the Internet attests. But it is not adequately defined.

I suggest that Article 2 of the UN genocide convention can be adapted towards this end. It defines genocide as acts "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such." It then goes on to delineate the ways this destruction is done.

An effective definition of sociocide might, then, be the following : "The destruction in whole or in part of the collective existence of a community of diverse social, cultural, linguistic or other affinity groups promoting mutual respect and tolerance."

Post-scriptum :

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