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Summery

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“Volatile tragedy” –

Possible applications of cultural anthropology in genocide research

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Initial questions

What is Genocide? Genocide, as ancient as it seems to be, is a relatively new term, and a problematic one. It was created by Raphael Lemkin in 1944, as he was stressing the importance of an international law, that would be able to prosecute perpetrators of mass murder. His efforts led to the United Nations preliminary resolution in 1946. (Hinton-O'Neil 2009:3) While systematic intergroup violence most probably was ever present throughout human history, now we have a name for it. Thus we now call the 20th Century the 100 years of genocide, and through this, we at the same time can acknowledge, and remove ourselves from its factual horrors. According to the text of the 1946 resolution 96-1 genocide is "when racial, religious, political and other groups have been destroyed, entirely or in part." (Hinton 2002:8) This was true to Lemkin's original intention, as opposed to the 1948 Article II of Genocide Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, that excluded "political and other groups." This decision of the member states signals the problematic nature of human kinds relationship towards its own actions. While they created a name to identify one of the most feral forms of violence, they at the same time ensured that it should be as elusive as possible. The 1948 Convention even included the distinction "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part". Meaning that even if events listed in Article II would occur, it would not be addressed as genocide, save the fact of the intention of destruction is evident. This is what Alexander Laban Hinton calls the "dark side of modernity", the tragic truth that genocide frightens and disturbs us, and while we acknowledge its horrors, at the same time every group is trying to escape this stigma, and tries to preserve the right to inflict destruction on others, in form of state sponsored or tolerated violence. Also this approach makes post conflict reconciliation harder, for it allows the decision over such events to be placed in the hands of the group or groups, that stand more powerful, and are internationally more acknowledged at the end of any given conflict.

Aim of the research

Some might say that genocide should be understood as historical events, and should be understood in the dichotomy of good and evil, for this will serve the improvement of humanity, and the protection of the victim groups. But the creation of monolithic systems of truth actually can be seen as a negative process, that ignores the multivocality of the individuals lived experiences. And through this ignorance gives grounds to a reinvention, reinterpretation of historical events, in a way that it constitutes the denial of historical crimes. With genocide we are not facing a simple case of misinterpretation, something that can be addressed and salved by historians, the bearers of objective knowledge, the underling problems are not of the a simple lies that shatter in the light of truth.

If existence as Heidegger claimed, “finds it's meaning in temporality”, then we can assume that the present is in fact the history of itself, and all social phenomenons are questions of now, there for something that is naturally immune to the charms of historical facts. In this case it can only be fully understood through an anthropological analysis, since historical facts are nonexistent, or at least irrelevant from this perspective. Also if we assume that we all live in “imagined communities”, and we can analyze “cultural stuff” that forms the basis of ones national or ethnic, or any other group related identity, then we can discard any observable social events, just for it would be easier to label them as the product of malevolence.

Therefor I stress the importance of a research that addresses this issue. My research, through structural deconstruction of the narratives, aims to achieve a deeper understanding of the problem. Hopefully to help a meaningful social discussion, leading up to a formulation of a mutually shared cultural memory, built upon not the denial or relativization, but the respect of each others traumas and suffering.

An anthropology of genocide

The anthropological approach of genocide tries to break away from the legal terminology, and stresses the importance of a more moderate approach, as Helen Fein proposes: “Genocide is sustained purposeful action by a perpetrator to physically destroy a collectivity directly or indirectly, through interdiction of the biological and social reproduction of group members, sustained regardless of the surrender or lack of threat offered by the victim” (Fein 1990:24) For such an approach, as Hinton argues: ”without losing analytic specificity, more easily accounts for the fact that group boundaries are socially constructed across contexts and throughout time.” (Hinton 2002:5) These boundaries also have shifting edges and fuzzy boundaries. Since personal or group identity as a psychodynamic process and social construction is highly performative, it is only visible and can only be understood when it comes in contact with it's own construction, the *stranger*. Intergroup conflicts can not be understood without understanding the individual communities, and the way they construct their realities. Social reality is the way people imagine the world to be, and imagine the ways the strangers exist. This emotional and affective processes create the this materialization of the unknown in the language of fear. The constructed nature of social existence is not a new concept, and one must stress that the imaginary nature makes them not less, but incomprehensibly more powerful. One is not just trapped in his own projections, but also in what others constructed. Relations of power, economic processes, and other projective mechanisms are forcing identity in to us, and an abstract “we” as a community forcing identity into others (Clarke 2008:524). It is clear to see that genocide is more than a legal term, and is one of the most complex exposures of human behavior, it can only be understood by looking at all the involved groups, victims, perpetrators, witnesses, and bystanders alike, and most importantly the processes that created the actors in the first place. In short an anthropology of genocide aims to understand genocide from the inside. And through this knowledge, even if it can not be prevented, the factors leading up to it can probably be signaled, and the trauma that past events has left, can be eased by mutual understanding.

Trauma and lived war experiences

It is also important to state, that a genocide is not over, when the physical violence ends. Through the processes of denial, relativization, or just oblivion in time, the trauma of the whole society still remains buried in the everyday life, inflicting far reaching damages into the present, unless reconciliation can be reached. This again signifies the importance of the understanding of such conflicts. For this it is important to look at, without questioning the reality of genocides, “the ways in which discourses about the truth have been deployed”. (Hinton-O`Neill 2009:13) This way, the researcher needs to look at not just the factual chain of events, but the reality that the society constructed to place itself in it. The network of truth, memory, representation and imagination needs to be researched, to reach an understanding of the reality of involved groups. This effort is crucial, for the post conflict societies need to reach a shared understanding of the past, to come terms with the differences of their interpretation, and to reach a level of reconciliation, that allows healing. Without this, the society will be trapped in a vacuum of constant fear, mistrust, and frustration. This not only preserves the possibility of the recurrence of violence, but can also prevent economical, and social prosperity. This gives the research a relevance in Eastern Europe, where the unresolved traumas, the constant competition over the possession of truth and memory, are effecting the wider aspects of the european integration, and on the long run the lasting peace both within and between the states of the region.

References:

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