

**When Genocide becomes the 'Lesser Evil':
The Bystander-Collaborator in the Era of 'Savage Politics'
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Abstract

For the first time in history, we are witness to a series of 'collaborative' (fully televised) episodes of genocide and ethnic cleansing. In the Syrian killing fields, the perpetrators are not furtive criminals hiding in shame, but proud 'hunters' happy to invite friends to the party. All the major democracies are present on the scene as well, but choosing to occupy themselves with parallel acts of murder and mayhem. These are not hunting parties on the perimeter of Auschwitz, but murder festivities inside the camp. The only complaints are about that foul stench, and the unseemly sight of piled corpses (why do those refugees have to bother us?). For the first time since the Convention, there is almost an international consensus on genocide being the lesser evil, something not just to be tolerated, but should be helped along so that we should all go on to attend to more important things.

Social science is playing it as well. It does provide some of the narratives that make genocide appear as 'solution'. We have never been better placed to understand the motives and reasons of genocide perpetrators and collaborators. For we are all today in that situation. The 'banality of evil' is today so transparently observable as to cause to wonder: how could we have missed this? Ask Samantha Power.

Keywords: Samantha Power; genocide; Responsibility to Protect; holocaust;

Like many senior American and Western officials, Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, does her best to avoid calling the genocidal violence in Syria by its proper name. But she often comes close. In a speech at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Prevention and Fight against Genocide on April 16, 2014, she thought Syria worth a mention under this label.¹ The following month, speaking in support of a resolution to refer crimes in Syria to the ICC, she added: "Today is about accountability for crimes so extensive and so deadly that they have few equals

¹ See speech text here: <http://www.globalr2p.org/media/files/remarks-by-ambassador-samantha-power.pdf>.

in modern history”.² That is close enough, and many would agree. But most (including her boss, President Barak Obama) also agree it is wise to do nothing about it. Apparently, quite a few presidential errands take precedence over stopping genocide.

President Barak Obama, who has been severely criticised for his attitude on the ongoing carnage, could not resist slipping into the typical ‘Orientalist’ repertoire of blaming the victims of despotism for their plight. In his January 2016 State of the Union Address, he made the outrageous claim that the Middle East’s current woes were “rooted in conflicts that date back millennia.”³ This was a narrative ruse to justify indifference to atrocities by conveying the notion that barbarism was endemic to that region, and we ‘civilised people’ should not get ourselves entangled in that mess. This is the more ironic since Power, who shot to fame for her trenchant debunking of such indifference, has identified this type of ‘othering’ as the key component in the formula that assigns the victims of mass atrocities to a realm of indifference. In her celebrated 2002 book, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, and subsequent interventions,⁴ she found this assigning of the ‘problem’ to a distant place and people who ‘have been killing each other for centuries’, key to America’s chronic inaction on genocide. It is precisely, she protested, how one should not talk about people who are essentially ‘like us’.

The Bystander in the Camp

What is remarkable about the Obama-Power stance on the genocide in Syria is not mere indifference, but virtual complicity. Unlike Rwanda, seen by many as the low point of American evasion of moral responsibility, Syria is an arena where US presence is visible and active. It purport leads an ‘international coalition’ incorporating almost every state in the world with a bomber to spare. But the omnipresent bombers are not a worry to genocide perpetrators, for they are not the target. The priority here is to ‘combat terrorism’. Victims of genocide were rather, advised to ‘negotiate’ with the perpetrators,⁵ an advice that violates a cardinal rule in the ‘Power Doctrine’, where calls for

² Leila Nadya Sadat, ‘Genocide in Syria: International Legal Options, International Legal Limits, and the Serious Problem of Political Will’, Legal Studies Research Paper Series, Paper No. 15-02-02, February 2015, p. 9.

³ “Remarks of President Barack Obama – State of the Union Address As Delivered”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-%E2%80%93-prepared-delivery-state-union-address>.

⁴ Samantha Power, , *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, New York: Basic Books, 2002. See also her April 2002 presentation at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Relations, at: <http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20020411/index.html>,

⁵ US Secretary of State John Kerry reported told aid workers alarmed at Russian bombardment of civilian targets and lack of access to besieged areas in February 2016: ‘What do you want me to do? Go to war with Russia? Is that what you want?’ *Middle East Eye*, 6 February 2016; at: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/opposition-blame-syrian-bombing-kerry-tells-aid-workers-1808021537#sthash.fyz4YQ0S.dpuf>.

peace talks and ceasefires with genocide perpetrators are deemed a distraction and time-buying device.⁶

As genocide became the proverbial 'lesser evil', even terrorism acquired many shades of grey: 'terrorism' perpetrated (or merely threatened) by anti-Assad factions, became *haram* (strictly prohibited, to use Islamic terminology), while the terrorism of the pro-Assad factions was merely *makruh* (frowned upon, but not worthy of any sanctions). Power herself came to symbolize an administration that has failed to live to its convictions, accused as the administration's inaction on the Syrian genocide became a glaring indictment of Obama's team as a whole.⁷

But this is inaction with a difference. What is so specific to the Syrian carnage is that it will go in history as the first 'collaborative' genocide, not just in the sense that the Syrian regime has received plenty of outside help, itself a first. All other genocides were committed behind a presumed veil of concealment and sovereign privilege, within a definitive window of opportunity, time-wise, providing 'outsiders' with plausible deniability. No in this, the world's first televised genocide, where everyone is party to it. Additionally, those with military presence in the vicinity cannot just call themselves bystanders. They are not outside the perimeter next to Auschwitz; they are inside. A head of state can claim that he/she did not switch the TV on for the past five years, nor did s/he read a newspaper or an intelligence brief (we know how busy Presidents can be!). But such excuses are not available to top officials of a government conducting its own war virtually next door. Soldiers and intelligence operatives conducting that war need to deal with the perpetrators and exchange 'information' with them every evening, perhaps over coffee, just as those Gestapo officers did have their cosy meals after a hard day's work in Auschwitz. Presumably that exchange included queries like: how many villages or streets did you wipe out today?

This is a genocide with no bystanders. Everyone is an active collaborator. This raises a totally novel situation about the status of these presumed collaborators in the first internationally sanctioned genocide. The thick veil which shields this category of perpetrators is made of the same stuff as the Emperor's new clothes: plenty of spin. I will take issue later with Giorgio Agamben's idea of the concentration camp being 'the hidden paradigm of the

⁶ A point on which Obama himself seems to agree, when it suits him. See: Evan Osnos, 'In the Land of the Possible', *The New Yorker*, December 22 & 29, 2014 Issue, at:

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/12/22/land-possible>.

⁷ Evan Osnos, 'In the Land of the Possible', *The New Yorker*, December 22 & 29, 2014,

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/12/22/land-possible>. See also: Abe Greenwald, 'On His Watch', *Commentary*, December 14, 2015, at (<https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/on-his-watch/>).

political space of modernity'.⁸ However, Agamben's important insight regarding the figurative 'camp' as a constructed zone that 'delimits a space in which the normal order is de facto suspended', and atrocities can be committed at will,⁹ is pertinent here. Like Arendt's illumination of the contribution of imperialist extra-legal violence to the rise of totalitarian terror, Agamben's point about the designation of zones 'placed outside the normal juridical order',¹⁰ can illuminate the current designation of 'zones of indistinction' where atrocities can become the unremarkable norm (such as the perennial ghetto of Gaza, Guantanamo, etc.).¹¹ It is context, it is the power relations and dynamics of this drawing of boundaries that are worthy of investigation.

Genocide as a 'Solution'

The fact that genocide had become tolerable, almost an instrument of US foreign policy, should not be that surprising. It is often forgotten that genocide is almost always proposed by the perpetrators as a 'solution' (the 'final solution') to a 'problem'. Michael Mann seems to dispute this, arguing that genocide 'is rarely the initial intent of perpetrators', and more often than not, it is a Plan C: a reaction to the failure of successive phases of repression.¹² Benjamin Valentino partially concurs, arguing that as a "'final solution" to its perpetrators' most urgent problems', genocide is 'rarely a policy of first resort'.¹³ Leaving aside the many substantive critiques of these positions,¹⁴ we are concerned here with the vital moment at which genocide presents itself as a 'solution', no matter how late it comes in the process of escalation.

There are two elements to this moment. The first, already captured by Valentino, is a determination to accomplish certain objectives and counter imminent threats, whatever the cost. The second is a framing narrative outlining the vital interests to be protected and the nature of threats endangering them. In this regard, a more pertinent definition of genocidal

⁸ Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 73.

⁹ Agamben. *Homo Sacer*, p. 99.

¹⁰ Agamben. *Homo Sacer*, p. 96.

¹¹ Yehouda Shenhav, 'Imperialism, Exceptionalism and the Contemporary World', in Marcelo Svirsky (ed.), *Agamben and Colonialism*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012, pp. 26-27.

¹² Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 9-10.

¹³ Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20th Century*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 67.

¹⁴ See for example, John Breuilly *et. al.*, 'Debate On Michael Mann's The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing', *Nations and Nationalism* 12: 3 (2006), pp. 389-411

violence must capture this narratively framed state of desperation. The focus thus should not be the number of victims, but rather the lack of concern for numbers or limits. Genocidal violence is thus violence that brooks no limits.¹⁵ The perpetrators do not care how many victims fall, or what level of destruction is wrought in pursuit of predetermined political objectives. For the framing narratives dictate genocidal action as urgent, unavoidable and heroic.

Genocidal episodes thus invariably start with a story line. Consider the narrative of Marc Forster's 2013 action film, *World War Z*, where an infectious virus turns whole populations into aggressive marauding zombies. The story line leaves no sensible course of action other than to massacre the infected. If your own nine-year old daughter gets infected, your only option is to blow her head off, in order to save her mother and five-year old sibling. That is the logic of the narratively constructed situation. The 'zombies' (the 'already dead') are killed by the story line. It is the same with the non-fictional framing narrative: genocide and mass atrocities, the victims of are *already* dead. The perpetrators are in the grip of nightmarish narratives of impending doom, where instant and drastic action is needed to defend one's cherished world and the values underpinning it from threatening evil forces. Ordinary rules and everyday norms must be set aside if they become impediments to this noble task, which is not one for faint hearts.

To understand the genocidal (or the terrorist, which is the same thing) frame of mind, one has to understand how these nightmarish narratives of desperation are generated, circulated and successfully promoted among a mass audience who would fall in their grip. No genocide can take place without skilful storytellers.¹⁶ There are also countering roles for courageous intellectuals, inspired leaders and visionary activists. For every Hitler, Milosevic, Barry Goldwater, Eugène Terre'Blanche, Pol Pot, there is a Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr, etc., etc. It is only when the latter fail (or fail to appear), do the former win.

'Bystanders' and silent (or not so-silent) partners in atrocities also have their farming and justifying narratives which help its authors and promoters sleep at night. As Power explained in great detail in her book, American leaders excelled in this department of invented narratives of convenience: the

¹⁵ El-Affendi, *Genocidal Nightmares*, p. 5.

¹⁶ See Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Genocidal Nightmares: Narratives of Insecurity and the Logic of Mass Atrocities*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 1-18, 29-47 and chapter 7 on Serbia and Croatia. For a lucid and revealing account of the construction and marketing of narratives of insecurity in Rwanda, see: Lee Ann Fujii (2004) 'Transforming the moral landscape: the diffusion of a genocidal norm in Rwanda', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 6:1, 99-114, DOI: 10.1080/1462352042000194737. See also, Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

violence is 'two-sided' (those insolent genocide victims!); response will be futile or counter-productive; one should not be 'emotional', rather things should be judged calmly and rationally; avoiding the word 'genocide'.¹⁷

The sum of it is that genocide (and silent complicity in it), represents, from the perspective of these policy makers, the best policy. Long before Syria and Rwanda, leaders in the US and many other countries had consistently 'refused to believe' the mounting evidence that the Holocaust was in progress in Nazi Germany, and refused to do anything about it when denial became untenable. This, Power notes, has become a pattern for US bureaucrats and policymakers in the face of almost every genocide: refusing to believe (or even see), and shirking the responsibility to act. The problem was thus not a 'failure' of policy, but a 'ruthlessly effective' conduct of a policy of doing nothing.¹⁸

One can choose at random an illustration of how narratives justifying extreme measures (genocide, mass murder, torture, drone assassinations) are generated by politicians, intellectuals, editorial rights, public commissions, etc. The epigram with which Michael Ignatieff's book, *The Lesser Evil*, (a valiant attempt to justify torture and other extreme counter-terror measures), is a quote from Gibbon describing 'the cruel prudence of Julius' in perpetrating a wholesale massacre of Gothic youth in all major eastern cities of the empire. That measure, Gibbon opines, has saved the region from deadly 'internal enemies'. In other words, it provided a 'solution', a lesser evil to ward a greater one. As Ignatieff puts it in the form of a question: 'What lesser evils may a society commit when it believes it faces the greater evil of its own destruction?'¹⁹

This is a reminder that we are not here looking at the perpetrators of genocide, but also about those who were supposed to stop it, and have espoused the 'never again' slogan not just as a motto, but as a legal commitment enshrined in international and national laws. In hindsight, however, it would now appear that the anti-genocide zeal exhibited by R2P enthusiasts (including Power before becoming an integral part of the "ruthlessly effective" bureaucracy of indifference she has decried so vehemently before), was no more than a brief interlude in a long standing official indifference to the plight of victims of atrocities. The dominant pattern has been, and remains, to see genocide, and indifference to it, as the best policy, as the 'solution'.

¹⁷ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, p. xviii.

¹⁸ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, p. xxi.

¹⁹ Michael Ignatieff, *The Lesser Evil*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 1.

The Logic of Humanitarianism

It is not only policy makers who spin narratives that justify inaction. Political theorists also play a role, and Power's invocation of a duty to 'stop genocide' was criticized by some as a 'solution from hell'. It mirrored the same neo-conservative adventurism which led America to its disastrous war in Iraq. According to this view,

That neoconservatism and humanitarian interventionism rose concurrently is no coincidence. Both programmes called for what might be termed 'transformative invasions': they assumed military force could easily transform foreign polities.²⁰

This association between the neo-conservative imperialists and the supporters of humanitarian intervention, of the UN-endorsed doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is common in critiques of the latter. Both are said to share a faith (or rather a delusion) about the miraculous capacity of military power, and certitude about their own moral righteousness, reflected in the parallel advocacy of the wars in Iraq and Libya, respectively (Wente, 2011). The 'war on genocide', like the 'war on terror', is premised on a 'fundamental belief in an emancipatory American hegemony'.

While the 'war on terror' made liberalism subservient to American power, the fight against genocide wants to reverse the hierarchy. 'Save Darfur' falls within a wider 'liberal absolutist' (in Anatole Lieven's felicitous phrase) and American exceptionalist movement. It bestows on the U.S. the right to identify 'evil', and excise it thereby creating a better world—saving other nations from the prison of their own history (De Waal, 2009).

These comparisons are simplistic and deeply flawed, as is the equally common portrayal of the Iraq war as a democratic promotion/ humanitarian venture gone tragically wrong. Iraq is not a sobering lesson for 'misguided' proponents of humanitarian intervention, since it was no more than an externally mounted coup d'état to remove a regime and install another in its place, an exercise that the US and other allies have engaged into countless of times before, from Vietnam to Chile and from Congo to Iran, and many places in between. Iraq could have billed as a humanitarian mission (but that was not how it was framed), if by this we mean if it was meant to end the genocidal sanctions on Iraq, in view of Madeleine Albright's notorious

²⁰ Stephen Wertheim, 'A solution from hell: the United States and the rise of humanitarian interventionism, 1991–2003', *Journal of Genocide Research*, (2010), 12 (3–4), pp. 149–172 (p. 150).

admission in a May 1996 CBS interview that the death of half a million Iraqi children was a price worth paying for containing Saddam (a point she made without hesitation, even though the interviewer mentioned Hiroshima)!

The long list of misgivings voiced by sceptics and outright detractors about how R2P as a fundamentally flawed approach are now familiar. It was 'redecorated colonialism', a re-packaging of the 'White Man's Burden' or the '*mission civilatrice*' in fancy language; it was wilfully selective, deliberately inapplicable to powerful states; was a disguised 'war on terror', aiming to trample on state sovereignty to advance western security agendas; it is a giant operation to globalise western liberal (or rather neoliberal) models of governance and development (Paris, 2010: 344-54).

Some decry R2P's excessive idealism and 'morality-laden discourse' that was 'naïve and disconnected from reality' (Pingeot and Obenland, 2014: 6-7). Others go further, questioning the liberal pretensions of Western-led interventionism, while the real aim was 'to keep the lid on or to manage the 'complexity' of non-Western societies' (Chandler, 2010a: 137, 148, 153-5). R2P's liberal credentials were also questioned because of accusations of favouring war and taking the state's capacity to provide security, rather than its accountability to its citizens, as the source of its legitimacy. Its limited political goal of waging wars with the latest precision-guided munitions and technology 'has all the limitations of utopianism without any of the redeeming nobility or consistency of purpose' (Cunliffe, 2014: 64).

Syria has provided at least a definitive refutation of one these misgivings: the claim about R2P being disguised imperialism. The cosy camaraderie of imperialist terror warriors, expansionist Russians, adventurist Iranians and genocide perpetrators in the Syrian killing fields conclusively shows that, when necessary, genocide and the war on terror can happily be coordinated on the same theatre, with great efficiency.

It is interesting that the more vociferous R2P critics, who usually come from the left, have recently been joined by a host of right wing partisans, led by the famous Sarah Palin who counselled: 'Let Allah decide it!' GOP presidential hopeful Donald Trump cast American indifference as a virtue, suggesting that the genocidal tactics of the Assad-Putin duo are the best for that region, and the world.²¹

²¹ "Why Donald Trump is praising Vladimir Putin", *The Washington Post*, 1 October 2015, 13 Januar, 2016, (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/10/01/why-donald-trump-is-praising-vladimir-putin/>)

In any case, critiques of R2P, whether from the left or right, do not answer the central question: what do we do when we become witness to mass atrocities, which occur virtually in our living rooms these days? Shall we adopt the 'Putin Doctrine' (or the 'Trump Doctrine': the idea that nasty genocidal dictators should be allowed to go one with their business unperturbed, and even receive some help.

Not many R2P critics are as that explicit on accepting genocide as a 'solution', but at least a few are honest enough to make the suggestion that permitting (or even helping?) mass murdering despots to finish the job may be the more 'humanitarian' option. For example, 'a quick victory by Qaddafi -- which appeared likely in February [2011]-- would have resulted in fewer deaths than the prolonged conflict.'

The notion of acquiescing to a brutal crackdown on humanitarian grounds may seem perverse. But humanitarians make that kind of calculation all the time, though not always explicitly. The scale of human suffering in North Korea, for instance, dwarfs that in Libya. Yet no serious observer calls for intervention there, because of the expected cost (Bosco, 2011).

The fault of Putin *et. al.* may thus be their tardy arrival at Assad's genocidal party. Had they joined the killing earlier, the rebellion could have been quelled may be at the price of half the current tally in murder and mayhem. *That* would be real humanitarianism!

In this age of media saturation, the 'Trump Doctrine' presupposes the construction of thicker narrative walls to insulate what is left of our humanity from the surrounding tide of suffering. We have also to un-invent the political, military and moral shifts which have made R2P thinkable, and feasible. This precisely what made R2P enthusiasts argue that while military action should not always be the first choice, genocide perpetrators would factor probable intervention in their calculus if it was consistently and credibly threatened.²²

The Syrian Test Case

The televised Syrian genocide has become *the* test case in this debate. It is no longer a question of whether or not to intervene, since almost everybody has already intervened. It is what you tell your pilots and soldiers to do. We are

²² Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Worse than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity*, New York: Little Brown, 2010.

currently in uncharted territory, as the anti-genocide norm, the mother of all post-War international norms, is for the first time being deliberately flouted. It looks like there is a new international norm which says genocide could be indeed be a solution. Political and legal thought has yet to catch up with this new reality.

It is a fact that of post-War commitments to 'stop and punish' genocide has been honoured more in the breach, and during the Cold War, the major powers and their clients have been responsible, between them, for the bulk of atrocities and genocidal episodes in recent decades. The UN systems insistence on keeping the murderous Khmer Rouge regime as the legitimate representative of Cambodia even after its ouster from power in 1978 is a most dramatic illustration of this dereliction of duty.

However, this is the first time in modern history where parliaments vote to let genocide go on, and policy makers make explicit statements to this effect. Newspaper editorials, experts and pundits, top politicians and even UN officials concur that nothing could or should be done about the Syrian genocide.

This is not the first time. Like the Khmer Rouge, the murderous regime of Hafez Assad perpetrated massacres in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon in the summer of 1976, an event that did not even register internationally. When scores of thousands of people were massacred, detained, tortured or disappeared in the Syrian city of Hama in 1982, the reaction in major capitals was almost celebratory. Thomas Friedman, later to become a prominent *New York Times* columnist, calmly judged that massacre 'the natural reaction of a modernising politician... in a relatively new nation-state trying to stave off retrogressive... elements'; adding:

That is why, if someone had been able to take an objective opinion poll in Syria after the Hama massacre, Assad's treatment of the rebellion probably would have won substantial approval, even among many Sunni Muslims. They might have said, 'Better one month of Hama than fourteen years of civil war like Lebanon.'²³

This presumptuous claim on the behalf of Syrians was sadly not an isolated rant of a deranged mind. Editorials in major Western newspapers at the time were equally 'understanding' of Assad's genocidal proclivity. The editorial of *The Times* of London on February 15, 1982 ran under the title: 'The best Assad we have', deeming

²³ Thomas Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, London, 1989, pp. 100-101.

murderous despot preferable to 'another Khomeini' who would inevitably be more genocidal. Assad was praised as 'a man of straightforward dealing and statesmanlike behaviour; very far from the doctrinaire radical some imagine him to be.'²⁴ This callous stance anticipated the justification of many other 'lesser evils' in the context of the 'war on terror', especially if a society (on in this case, a despotic regime) 'believes it faces the greater evil of its own destruction'²⁵ (to cite Ignatieff again). Given that all despotic regimes are by nature paranoid and insecure, this is practically a licence to kill.

In the 'Desert of the Real'

This a reminder of a deliberate tendency to assign the Middle East to the 'desert of the real' (a term borrowed by Slavoj Žižek from the 1999 film *The Matrix*),²⁶ a realm of perpetual barbarism, 'quarantined' on the margins of the 'civilized world'. It is akin to the more historically grounded, regulated barbarism of mid-19th century New York as fictionally portrayed in Martin Scorsese's 2002 film, *Gangs of New York*. Here Agamben's 'zone of indistinction' demonstrates its endurance. As the case of New York shows (not to mention the slave trade), the boundaries of these zones can themselves migrate and shift. Inhabitants of regions designated as 'barbaric' (or sites suitable for cathartic barbarism by assorted colons, from India and Congo to Abu Ghraib) may migrate to other regions, where they could enjoy the benefits of 'civilised' life. Alternatively, geographies of barbarism could be 'invented', delineating arbitrary zones, such as Guantanamo Bay, as sites of *halal* barbarism. This a reminder of old-new geographic reversals (slave trade, mass migration, explosions and ethnic cleansing, etc.). Some of these zones of exclusion (in particular ghettos and shantytowns), are growing even today, with their hapless inhabitants are at once banished and accused of unwillingness to 'integrate'. It is enough to note how a person like the suave and wonderfully 'integrated' Barak Obama continues to be seen as an outsider by many!²⁷

Obama has overdone the integration thing by becoming the champion of the system's selective barbarism. The ivy-league law professor and Noble Peace Laureate, admits to personally authorising extra-judicial killings (via drones) every Tuesday before lunch,²⁸ just as Assad would do. Recent revelations indicate that drone strikes kill innocent people 90% of the time (this is assuming that the intended

²⁴ Cited in: Robert Dreyfuss, 'Syrian revolt may undo secret pact with Israel', *EIR International*, 9: 8 (March 2, 1982), p. 33.

²⁵ Michael Ignatieff, *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 1.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London: Verso, 2002.

²⁷ See: Abdelwahab El-Affendi, 'The Souls of Muslim Folk: The "Obama Phenomenon" and the Paradoxes of Paranoid anti-Multiculturalism', *American Journal of Islamic Social Science*, 29: 4 (2012), pp. 63-86, ISSN: 0742-

²⁸ Jo Becker And Scott Shane, 'Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will', *The New York Times*, 29 May 2012, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html>.

targets were 'guilty', which is of course incorrect from the perspective of the law. So the strikes kill innocent people 100% of the time).²⁹

There is an uncanny link between Obama's addiction to drone assassinations and his reluctance to invest any political capital in defending the innocent in Syria. According to the NYT article just cited, Obama was haunted with a dread that a successful terror attack could 'derail his presidency'. This links to multiple insecurities of the new president, a rank outsider from the left, worried that the state apparatus and its security core might not trust him. So he acted 'macho' in a safe zone, on people who could be killed with impunity.³⁰ His inability to empathise with the human victims of his attacks, seeing there only haunting terror threats and 'targets' (already dead zombies, certified by the security narratives on his desk), cannot be dissociated from his lack of empathy with the victims of genocide. These are also 'already dead' by virtue of their habitation in the 'desert of the real'.

This designation of whole regions as a potential 'camp' (often literally), is the more ironic in view of recent events that had appeared to promise something radically different. The initially successful revolutions of the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 were, as Hamid Dabashi put it, 'creating a new geography of liberation'.³¹ The sudden and dramatic smashing of assigned barriers provided a clear and decisive refutation of accumulated 'wisdom' that persisted in regarding these assigned geographies of an 'outer space' of barbarism and 'non-humanity' as inherent and/or permanent. This image was shattered by the courageous peaceful protests which rid the region within a few months of some of the most brutal perennial dictators. Civil society actors of all persuasions, gender, ethnicity, age, came together in beautiful concerts of civic action: no sign of 'ancient hatreds', or 'willing subservience to tyranny'. The whole world watched in awe this televised show of solidarity, civility and courage.

The rest is now history. It is well known how anti-democratic forces coalesced to undermine, subvert, and reverse all the gains made by the spring. In almost all cases, with the partial exception of Tunisia, and to a lesser degree Libya, things became much worse than before. Iraq is now vying with Syria in levels of barbarism, and Egypt is not far behind. Again, there was remarkable silence in the face of these excesses. In fact, there is praise for Egyptian dictator in Congress and elsewhere has given comedians a field day. Human Rights Watch did protest the January 2016 calls by the Egyptian minister of "justice" for the massacring of hundreds of thousands of opponents.³² However, the Egyptian regime has yet to be rebuked by any of its major

²⁹ Andrew Blake, 'Obama-led drone strikes kill innocents 90% of the time: report', *The Washington Times*, October 15, 2015, at: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/oct/15/90-of-people-killed-by-us-drone-strikes-in-afghani/>.

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³¹ Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, London: Zed Books, 2012, p. xviii.

³² "Egypt minister calls for killing 400,000 Brotherhood members and supporters", *Middle East Eye*, 28 January 2016 - at: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypts-justice-minister-calls-killing-400000-mb-members-and->

allies for actual crimes (including the torture and murder of a visiting Italian student in January 2016), let alone intended ones. Genocidal policies are not faced with silence here, but with subsidies. Any court of law would hold the collaborators as equally responsible.

The Terror of Savage Politics

The novel and unprecedented nature of this 'collaborative indifference' (to coin a phrase) raises anew and more acutely Hannah Arendt's question about the intellectual and ethical challenge posed by the Holocaust to social and political thought. To try to apply rational social science 'explanations' for the manifestations of totalitarian terror as exemplified in the concentration camp (a phenomenon that was almost 'beyond human understanding'), Arendt argued, fails to capture (even implicitly condone) the enormity of the horror.³³ Arendt's point has been interpreted to mean either the uniqueness and ineffability of the Holocaust, or the inadequacy of normal social science categories and methods to encompass the event. I concur with Robert Fine in accepting the latter interpretation.³⁴ It is clear that Arendt had moved in that direction in her later work, in particular with her discussion of the Eichmann trial and the controversial concept of the 'banality of evil' (I prefer to refer to this as the 'precariousness of human decency', as I explain elsewhere).³⁵

This is why many current treatments of the frenzied post-Arab Spring genocidal onslaught on civilians in countries like Syria, Iraq and Egypt (and the silence or gross misrepresentation of international complicity in it) remains fundamentally flawed. One can see this in the attempt of Marc Lynch and his collaborators to apply the 'contentious politics' approach to examine this episode.³⁶ No less problematic is a recent suggestion to apply the 'contentious politics' perspective to the study of genocide,³⁷ a proposal which would have Arendt turning in her grave. This is first because the 'contentious politics' concept, as elaborated by McAdam and his colleagues,³⁸ among others, is too broad a category. While such a broad brush encompassing events and processes from minor street protests to ethnic cleansing

[supporters-1842112087#sthash.TwAtoOPy.dpuf](https://www.hrw.org/supporters-1842112087#sthash.TwAtoOPy.dpuf); See HRW statement here:

<http://egywatch.org/2016/02/08/hrw-threat-by-egypts-zind-to-massacre-opposition-is-very-real/>.

³³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Meridian Books, 1958, p. 459; Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*, New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994, p.233; Peter Baehr, 'Identifying the Unprecedented: Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Critique of Sociology', *American Sociological Review*, 67, No. 6 (2002), pp. 805–809.

³⁴ Robert Fine, 'Hannah Arendt: Politics and Understanding after the Holocaust', in Robert Fine and Charles Turner (eds) *Social Theory after the Holocaust*, Liverpool University Press, 2000, pp. 19-46.

³⁵ El-Affendi, *Genocidal Nightmares*, pp. 11-15.

³⁶ Marc Lynch, ed., *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

³⁷ Aliza Luft, 'Genocide as Contentious Politics', *Sociology Compass*, 9/10 (2015), pp. 897–909.

³⁸ Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, 'Comparative Perspectives on Contentious Politics', in Mark Lichbach and Alan Zuckerman (eds.), *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure: Advancing Theory in Comparative Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, about 2009.

may be theoretically attractive, it involves a fundamental category mistake. Genocidal politics is not part of a continuum of 'contestation' that starts in civil activism. True, the Arab Spring started in civil pro-democracy protests and ended in attempts at mass extermination. However, to treat the reactions of the current regimes in Egypt and Syria as instances of 'contentious politics' is almost to condone/ trivialize the momentous shift.

Such lumping together of diverse and incommensurable phenomena fails to capture what is distinct about what I would like to call 'savage politics', which is that it is not politics at all. Genocide is not 'politics by other means'. Any theoretical framework that fails to point this out clearly is seriously deficient. A viable theory of politics must therefore grasp that savage politics is not politics any more than genocide is a war or a conflict (let alone 'contentious' politics). Stalinist purges were not trials either, more macabre theatre; neither did Mao's 'Cultural Revolution' have much to do with culture.

Arendt has struggled in her treatment of totalitarianism to come up with just such an approach. The problem with her analysis lies in the attempt to the death camps (and totalitarianism) both as the epitome of totalitarianism and also as potentially generalizable product of modernity. Agamben's positing of the concentration camp as the 'biopolitical paradigm of the modern', or 'the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity',³⁹ carries this approach further, and illustrates its limitations more graphically. Apart from the well-known critiques of his approach, his cavalier attempt to cast modern liberal democracies as varieties of totalitarianism makes both terms meaningless. Contrary to his claims about the death dealing sovereign state, modern liberal states tend to overprotect 'bare life'. The sanctity of life has acquired new levels in such states: abolishing the death penalty, thorough investigations of all suspicious deaths, high levels of health care, complex systems of social protection, even within the family, etc.

As mentioned above, however, Agamben's important insight on the assignment of zones outside the more secure metropolitan heartlands West to various levels camp-like status sheds light on a significant aspect of the current acceptance of genocide as 'policy'. Arendt has already pointed out the significance of the imperialist designation such killing zones in heralding genocidal violence. The Middle East is still a region where imperialism is alive and well, and where the struggles it had triggered has yet to be resolved. As a result, and due to acute ongoing contests over the orientation of the polity and the competing and irreconcilable concepts of the good life, politics here conforms to Chantal Mouffe's Schmittian 'enemy-friend' confrontation where the object is to eliminate the other. The aim is to subjugate everyone to brute force, with 'any means necessary'. As per our definition of

³⁹ Agamben. *Homo Sacer*, pp. 72-3.

genocidal violence, the perpetrators conceive of no upper limits on the amount of slaughter and carnage they wreak in order to achieve this goal. In this sense, the 'sectarian' factor is a tool rather than an objective. In fact, the subjugation of the sect is often seen as more urgent than that of the 'enemy', and less dissent is tolerated from 'within' the sect than outside it.

While Arendt regards totalitarianism as the negation of politics, Mouffe blames liberalism for doing away with the political. In celebrating of the advent of a "post-political" (or "end of history") order, a "second" or "late" modernity where old political divisions no longer matter, liberalism misses the point about the essence of the political as a Schmittian 'friend-enemy' polarization. Political questions are not about technical issue to be resolved by experts, but choices among fundamentally irreconcilable alternatives, involving contests between rival hegemonic projects and antagonistic identities. In simplistically overlooking this ineradicable antagonism inherent to the political, consensual liberal politics fails to engage properly in politics.⁴⁰ This failure has in fact contributed to recent conflict, including the rise of extremism and violence. The blurring of policy lines between left and right, and messianic preaching of a global hegemony of universalizable liberal values, have deprived people from genuine political alternatives, pushing them towards extremism. Violence can thus be seen as the outcome of too much liberalism, too much marginalizing of real politics in the name of a pseudo-consensus.⁴¹

Unlike Schmitt, however, Mouffe believes in the possibility of reconciling antagonistic political identities within a democratic framework while acknowledging the inherently adversarial character of the political. The other as a "constitutive outside" of every political identity can be tempered if the identities share enough in common. In such case, the other will not be treated as an enemy to be eradicated, but as an adversary to contest with over alternative hegemonies. She calls this adversarial relationship 'agonism', instead of antagonism, and sees it essential to democracy.⁴²

These insights are helpful in identifying the role of polarized identities in shifting the dynamics of politics from adversarial to the antagonistic, and from relative inclusion to total exclusion. The difference between Yugoslavia and Belgium can thus be seen to reside in a difference between regarding other as an enemy to be eliminated or an adversary to be peacefully 'vanquished'. The political shifts from being a Hobbesian/Schmittian war of domination to a 'game' where winning and the 'annihilation' of the opponent become largely symbolic, and where the 'rules of the game' respect the real interest of the adversary, who is also a 'partner'.

⁴⁰ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 1-7; 10-12

⁴¹ Mouffe, *On the Political*, pp. 64-89.

⁴² Mouffe, *On the Political*, pp. 14-20.

However, Mouffe does not fully theorize a non-prescriptive process for the shift from 'enemy' to 'adversary', unless we interpolate Mann's characterization of democratization as an inherently genocidal constitution of agonistic out of antagonistic politics by physically eliminating or removing the other. However, Mouffe's argument is precisely that such a feat cannot be accomplished, since the very nature of politics assumes an adversary. So even after eliminating one enemy, another is certain to appear.

Mouffe deplores the fact that politics in advanced democracies lacks passion. But this is precisely the case because actors also face minimal threats to their vital interests and core values from political alternation. I do not bother to exercise my right to choose between Cameron and Miliband because I do not fear that if Cameron does not win, militias will burn down my home, or MI5 will kidnap me on my way to work the following day. (I may be an optimistic guy). When politics really matters, living in "interesting times" can have its costs. The promise (or threat) of momentous changes (immigration, European unity, economic catastrophe, Scottish or Quebecois independence, etc.) can cause passions to run high, and prompt people to engage in politics with great enthusiasm. They may even resort to violence, and often do. They may even elect leaders like Donald Trump and Marie Le Pen.

Democratic politics is premised on a certain level of personal, group and system security. If a realistic "anti-hegemonic" challenge to the capitalist system would emerge, as Mouffe recommends, we would then be back in the realm of 'interesting' politics, and it would not be a pretty sight. Only when these challenges are neutralised, either because their demands have become mainstream, or because they have surrendered and abandoned them, could they be admitted as "adversaries" within the system. Mouffe acknowledges as much when she herself argues that groups that challenge the very basis of the democratic system must be excluded from it. In fact, the shift of radical theorists like Mouffe herself towards espousing liberal democracy is another sign of the enhanced security of the hegemonic system. As she puts it, she had been critical of the stance of social democratic politics in the 1970 'because we thought it was not radical enough. Now, we are in fact trying to protect what we were criticizing.'⁴³

In contrast, where the very ground underneath politics is being contested, normal (mundane, passionless) politics becomes impossible. If you are a beleaguered Egyptian 'liberal' fearful of an Islamist 'hijacking' of the state, a genocidal regime like the current one may appear a perfectly rational option. If you are victim to a

⁴³ Nico Carpentier & Bart Cammaerts, 'Hegemony, Democracy, Agonism and Journalism', *Journalism Studies*, (2006), 7: 6, 964-975, 970.

sectarian genocidal regime, then sheltering behind a murderous militia does not look that unreasonable.

That is why perspectives like Mouffe's fail to capture the specificity of 'savage politics' as non-politics, even anti-politics: the outer space of the political. We miss the central point in blaming liberalism for its antitheses (terror and right-wing populism), or seeing liberal politics as disguised totalitarianism with concentration camps everywhere. For the issue is the distinction between everyday politics and its genocidal outside. A 'post-Newtonian' political science is not one which lumps all political phenomena together under this rubric or that to produce a 'theory of everything'. Rather, it must recognize the irreducible distinctiveness of non-politics in the same way the Theory of Relativity had recognized the different set of laws applying to particles moving closer the speed of light. The realm in which genocide presents itself as 'solution' is a different realm altogether.

By the same token, the context in which an international consensus emerges around seeing genocide as a viable policy option, and genocide perpetrators as legitimate partners in combating a greater evil (whatever that maybe) is one we no longer recognize. It could mean that Agamben may be right after all: the concentration camp is the not-so-hidden paradigm of modernity. And we are all inmates now.

Conclusion: The Social Scientist as Accessory to Genocide

At some point in the near future, Samantha Power may need to pen down a melancholic tome on the 'banality of evil': on how the most passionate advocate of genocide victims can end up manning the front line in an operation that is helping the genocide machine along. All those career calculations and all those sophisticated calculations about lesser evils. Those guys in the middle of the ocean are already drowning, why risk my life (and that fat pension) in vain when nothing I can do will save them?

But what kind of testimony should social and political thinkers author? The narratives we spin are also part of the fabric that makes mass murder possible. As indicated earlier in relations to fictional narratives, mass atrocities become acceptable/ possible/ heroic not because men become possessed by spirits, but because they become possessed with scenarios of horror. And who usually authors those utopias that sends perfectly sane people chasing mirages, unmindful of those they trample underfoot in that quixotic stampede? (And wasn't Cervantes' masterpiece itself a brilliant illustration of how texts and narratives make people mad?) Who prepares and markets those scenarios of horror that paint my next-door neighbor as a monster in disguise? And who leads the way in drawing borders and

boundaries between the inside and outside of the Matrix? Who invents, produces and administers the blue and red pills?

There is this story about a Muslim scholar thrown in jail by an unjust ruler. He was approached one day by the prison guard, who was apprehensive about serving that tyrant. 'Am I an accessory to injustice?', he asked the scholar. 'No,' replied the sage. 'You are not. Accessories to injustice are those who wash you clothes, prepare your food, etc. As for you, you are *the* perpetrator of injustice.'

Along the same lines, one can say that political scientists are not *accessories* to genocide.

Arendt called for the assumption of a 'universal responsibility' in where everyone should 'assume responsibility for all crimes committed by human beings'. In such a scheme, 'good citizens would not shrink back in horror at German crimes and declare "Thank God, I am not like that", but rather recognise in fear and trembling the incalculable evil which humanity is capable of and fight fearlessly, uncompromisingly, everywhere against it.'⁴⁴

Such a stance has its problems, not only because it dilutes the responsibility of the perpetrators, but because it dangerously dissipate the responsibility of the would-be protectors. Even more dangerously, it authorizes everyone to act as protector, a license for free lance jihadists and every other adventurer who can rightly claim that the world has led down the Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Native Americans, etc. (Remember Orwell's enduring narratives about the Spanish Republic and its assorted battalions of saviours?)

The 'Responsibility to Protect' should lie precisely where it says in the UN-endorsed doctrine: with the proper international institutions and with the states that have the capability to act. That is why the guilty party in this ongoing tragedy are not those who failed to join the 'volunteers' in Syria, but those left jihadists as the only R2P actors in the field.

⁴⁴ Cited in Fine, 'Hannah Arendt', p. 30.