How Ordinary are 'Ordinary Perpetrators'? Notes on the Genocidal Mentality

De Swann, Abram [1]

[1] *University of Amsterdam, Netherlands*

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ABSTRACT

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The rich are affected by the external effects of the presence of poor people in their midst: they may be threatened by contagion, rebellion, crime and migration; they may hope to profit from the poor as voters, workers, consumers and recruits. Managing these external effects presents the rich with a collective action problem (De Swaan 1989a). Much depends on the way the rich, i.e. the elites, *perceive* the opportunities and dangers that the poor present them with. (Reis and Moore, 2005). In the course of five centuries the scope of social policy (poor relief, health care and also education) has increased from the medieval parish to cities and regions, and finally, for the past two centuries, to nation states. Yet, one may go beyond the nation and explore the potential of *transnational social* policy (De Swaan 1989b). After a brief upturn, these prospects have gradually receded in the past two decades.

Dire poverty has much diminished over the last decades, but at the same time global inequality of income and wealth has increased. Yet, at present, the prospects for transnational income programs is bleak. When it comes to health care, however, especially the control of infectious disease, the outlook is very different: after an initial reaction to close their borders to keep out the Ebola virus, most nations decided to concentrate instead on fighting the disease where it was rampant, in West Africa, with the USA in the role of a 'big actor'. In a much similar vein, richer nations have sought to agree upon a shared distributive norm for taking in immigrants, refugees from war and poverty, but have fallen back time and again on closing their own borders; collective action to improve the conditions in the countries of departure, and thus stem the flow of migrants, has been incidental and halting. Finally, ecological threats that from the very first were phrased in terms of 'saving the commons', i.e. in terms of collective action to create and maintain a global collective good, have been met with huge transnational programs for collective action, but while a very considerable part of 'threatened natural resources' are located in relatively poor countries, intervention by rich countries to help them protect these resources have been few, and even fewer are the instances of collective action by a coalition of richer countries to help poor countries protect the environment.

Very little is known about perpetrators of mass annihilation. They cannot be observed or interviewed 'in the field', while at work, and only very rarely afterwards in postgenocidal society, where they prefer to remain silent and anonymous.

Almost all that is known about them comes from judicial evidence. Only the mass murderers of regimes that have been defeated are ever brought before their judges. That leaves a few cases at best (Nazi-Germany, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia). Even in these defeated

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countries, only a small minority of perpetrators are ever tried. Trial documents tend to present a very distorted picture of the defendants who try to reduce their responsibility as much they can.

Nevertheless there is an almost complete consensus in the social sciences – a rarity in that field that mass murderers are ordinary people who in extraordinary circumstances have committed extraordinary evil. ('you and I under the same circumstances might have done the same thing').

The leading proponents of this 'situationist' view were Hannah Arendt, Stanley Milgram, and, Christopher Browning, whose evidence provides it with the most important support. This near unanimity has blocked inquiry into the personal biography (the 'disposition'), which increases the odds for the perpetrators to find themselves in a genocidal situation and helps to shapem their behavior, also in the postgenocidal setting.

To the degree that recruitment of the genocidaires is more compulsory or depends more on self-selection, personal dispositions plays a lesser or larger role. Obviously, an authoritarian upbringing and a conformist stance contribute to the odds of joining the ranks of the perpetrators. A prior career as a violence specialist (in the police or the military, or in crime) also adds to these odds.

The differences with people who did not become mass murderers are gradual and statistical.

From the literature it appears moreover, that genocidal perpetrators tend to have a moral conscience, but much more restricted to their kin, comrades and superiors; beyond that narrow circle moral obligation counts for much less than it does for most others. Moreover, the perpetrators appear to have a lower sense of agency. Finally, they show less empathy, let alone compassion, to anyone beyond their first circle.

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After all, even mass murderers are persons, different persons, distinct like everyone else.

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