

Draft Commentary on “Is Genocide Preventable? Some Theoretical Considerations,” by Thomas Cushman

By Eric Markusen

In this stimulating, iconoclastic essay, Professor Cushman applies a sociology of knowledge perspective to the emerging interdisciplinary field of genocide studies. This perspective regards “knowledge of genocide as a cultural product of various scholars with particular world-views, biographies, ideological dispositions, and material interests which shape and influence the structure of what we know about genocide.” One such “ideological disposition” that Cushman discerns in the writing of genocide scholars is the fundamental conviction that genocide is preventable.

While Cushman does not assert that genocide is intrinsically unpreventable, he does question the tendency of genocide scholars to assume that knowledge of genocide will somehow lead to successful efforts to prevent future cases. Indeed, he calls this an “orthodox belief in genocide studies” and warns that what he says in his essay is, “from the outset, a form of heresy.”

One factor identified by Cushman that helps account for this “Enlightenment” faith in the power of knowledge to improve the world, is the over-reliance by genocide scholars on theories and models that are “positivistic, naturalistic, and deterministic.” Such models, he argues, fail to adequately appreciate some of “the most important aspects of genocide as it appears in modern social conditions: its contingency, unpredictability, and its status as a product of human agency.”

As an example of such a “positivistic model,” Cushman cites an article by Barbara Harff and Ted Robert Gurr in which they identify background conditions and other indicators that genocidal violence may erupt in a particular society. Such “early warning signs” can, potentially, alert governmental and non-governmental actors to take action in time to prevent or stop mass killing. Cushman does not disagree that this approach may have some value, but he finds it woefully incomplete, with its focus “almost exclusively on endogenous factors” and its corresponding neglect of such “exogenous factors” as national interest, geopolitics, and “the condition of modernity.”

Failure by genocide scholars to properly confront the “condition of modernity” is another important and valuable theme of this essay. Cushman identifies a number of “aspects of modernity” which not only mitigate against prevention of genocide, but actually facilitate its perpetration. These aspects include: the tendency of modern governments to be swayed more by “realpolitik” than by Enlightenment values like human rights; faith in the “modern” practice of negotiation with actual and potential genocidaires; the “diffusion and entrenchment of bureaucracy as a means toward solving social problems;” the culture of indifference in modern, capitalist, consumer societies; modern mass media as agents of propaganda; and, finally, the availability of experts who often “obfuscate, confuse, and distract political leaders and citizenry by calling into question the reality of genocide”

The failure of genocide scholars to deal with such issues, Cushman suggests, may be why what he describes as “the genocide prevention industry” has been so woefully unsuccessful in preventing or stopping genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda during the 1990s. I return to “genocide prevention industry” below.

All of the above are important and valid points, and Cushman's effort to "study the study of genocide," to use his terms, is a welcome contribution by a scholar who does not claim to be an "expert" on genocide, but who brings powerful analytic and theoretical skills to critique the discourse of genocide scholars.

However, if Cushman's essay illustrates the benefit of someone from the outside looking into a specialized field of study in order to expose ideological and methodological limitations, it also demonstrates the challenges faced by scholars who attempt to critique a discipline on the basis of incomplete knowledge, which can lead to errors of fact and interpretation. While the margins of my copy of the text are filled with such comments as "good point" and "N.B.," they are also filled with question marks and critical comments.

For example, early in his essay, Cushman asserts that "most theories of genocide are ahistorical" and argues instead that such theories "must always be looked at in relation to the specific historical epochs in which they occur." However, the most important works in the field are in fact well-grounded historically, for example, Robert Melson's work on the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, Vahakn Dadria's publications on the Armenian genocide, Ben Kiernan's studies of the Khmer Rouge, Colin Tatz's work on the genocide of the Australian Aborigines, and many studies of the Holocaust. The relatively few genocide scholars who have attempted to develop actual theories of genocide have relied on such sources.

Moreover, Cushman perhaps overestimates the number of genocide scholars and the impact of genocide studies when he writes "Indeed, the 1990s, a period of rapid growth of the 'genocide prevention industry,' was the period in which two major genocides occurred in Bosnia and Rwanda." While the field originated during the 1940s with the scholarly work of Raphael Lemkin (most of which remains unpublished), scholars focused on genocide per se were few and scattered for several decades after World War II. It was not until 1995--after the Rwandan genocide and well into the Bosnian genocide--that a professional organization, the Association of Genocide Scholars, was established. And a journal focused exclusively on genocide, *Journal of Genocide Research*, was founded only in 1999. However, the willingness in 1999 of a coalition of nations to use NATO power to interrupt the Serbian expulsion of ethnic Albanians stands in contrast to the debacles of mid-decade.

I have questions about Cushman's depiction of the work of Leo Kuper, a pioneer in the field of genocide studies, on the issue of genocide prevention. Cushman appears to see in Kuper an example of the ideology of "preventionism." Cushman points out that in his landmark 1981 work, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century*, Kuper does, in the last chapter, address the issue of prevention. This is in the context of a discussion of societies that experienced ethnic or other group violence but did not degenerate into genocide. However, in my reading, there is no "orthodox faith" that knowledge of genocide alone would somehow naturally lead to prevention. Indeed, Kuper's pessimism about genocide prevention was expressed more directly in his 1985 book, *The Prevention of Genocide*. Writing of this book, Cushman states that "Kuper's faith in the prevention of genocide by the U.N. seems prosaic at best." (I am not sure exactly what Cushman means by "prosaic." Meanings given in my dictionary are: commonplace or dull; matter of fact or unimaginative.) In any case, the whole point of Kuper's book was not to express faith in the United Nations and optimism about genocide prevention, but to

expose and criticize its failure to effectively prevent genocides that occurred after the Holocaust and the creation of the UN Genocide Convention. It should be noted here that Cushman does not even mention two recent books on genocide prevention, *Protection Against Genocide: Mission Impossible?*, edited by Neal Riemer in 2000, and *How to Prevent Genocide*, by John Heidenrich in 2001. One would hope that he subjects them, and a forthcoming book by Herbert Hirsch, to his critical analysis.

Notwithstanding such caveats, which are small in proportion to its value, Cushman's essay is an important and timely contribution to the field of genocide studies. Indeed, we are fortunate that he has decided to expand this paper into a larger sociology of genocide studies and has organized a panel on "definitionalism" in genocide studies for the Galway conference of genocide scholars.

In conclusion, I hope that all genocide scholars have the opportunity to read this essay and to engage in dialogue and debate with Tom Cushman on these matters. Knowing him as a friend as well as colleague, I know he relishes such exchanges.