

Introduction: An Exchange on the Concept of Genocide

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The concept of genocide remains one of the most contested in the field of violence research, and its definition and application have inspired decades of scholarship and debate. In this forum, we host a pivotal exchange between two prominent voices: Martin Shaw, who defends the term's conceptual robustness and practical utility, and Dirk Moses, who critiques its limitations and calls for a fundamental rethinking of its theoretical underpinnings. This dialogue not only engages with the ongoing academic discourse but also highlights the practical implications of using 'genocide' in public debates and legal contexts.

Martin Shaw, a foundational scholar of genocide studies, has consistently advocated for refining and utilizing the concept of genocide as a tool for understanding mass violence. His work emphasizes the structural and political dynamics that underpin genocidal acts, arguing that genocide must be understood within the broader framework of warfare and state violence. In his seminal book *What is Genocide?*, Shaw defined genocide as 'a form of violent social conflict or war between groups', focusing on its relational and dynamic aspects rather than solely on the intent to destroy a group. He argued that this approach captures the complexities of genocide, moving beyond the legal definition articulated in the 1948 UN Genocide Convention, which he viewed as overly narrow and restrictive.

This contribution by Shaw, 'In Defence of the Concept of Genocide', is based on the annual Holocaust and Genocide Studies lecture he delivered on 17 October 2024 at the NIOD Institute in Amsterdam in front of a large public. His contribution delves into how the term 'genocide' can illuminate contemporary crises, such as conflicts in Gaza and Syria, and argues that the term retains its critical power as a lens for analysing structural violence and state-led atrocities, even as it has been politicized in public discourse. For Shaw, dismissing the term just for the fact that it has been politicized is like throwing out the baby with the bath water: it risks undermining efforts to recognize and combat systematic campaigns of destruction. His contribution

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to this issue reaffirms these positions, offering a robust defence of 'genocide' as an indispensable concept for academic inquiry and moral accountability.

Dirk Moses challenges the adequacy of the genocide framework to address the breadth of mass violence and atrocities. In his equally seminal intervention *The Problems of Genocide*, Moses critiqued the 'genocide mystique', a term he used to describe the moral and political authority the concept has accrued since its codification. He argued that this focus often obscures other forms of state violence, such as wars of conquest and imperial domination, which may not meet the strict criteria of genocide but are no less destructive. Moses introduced the concept of 'permanent security' as a lens to understand how states justify violence in the name of order and protection, suggesting this framework may be more encompassing and analytically fruitful than genocide.

This exchange could not be more timely. The past decade has witnessed the resurgence of mass atrocities in settings as diverse as Myanmar, Ethiopia, and Ukraine, and in the past year we have seen mass violence against civilians in Palestine and neighbouring Syria. At the same time, the term 'genocide' has become a flashpoint in international relations and public discourse, invoked to galvanize action or delegitimize adversaries. For instance, debates over whether the treatment of Uyghurs in China constitutes genocide or whether Russia's actions in Ukraine meet the threshold for the term underscore the stakes of this conceptual debate. As Shaw and Moses demonstrate, these controversies are not merely academic—they shape how governments, activists, and international bodies understand and respond to mass violence.

This exchange provides a space for rigorous and constructive dialogue. Seventeen years after his *What is Genocide?*, Shaw's essay sets the stage by reaffirming the value of 'genocide' as a category of analysis and moral judgment. He makes the case for its continued relevance, emphasizing how it can adapt to address contemporary challenges without losing its conceptual clarity. Moses' response offers a sharp counterpoint, highlighting the limitations and potential harms of clinging to a concept he views as inadequate for the complexities of modern violence. Together, their contributions invite readers to grapple with foundational questions: What does it mean to name an atrocity 'genocide'? Who benefits from this classification, and who is left out? How should scholars balance the need for precise definitions with the moral imperative to address all forms of systematic violence? And where does this leave the study of perpetrators?

By juxtaposing these perspectives, this issue aims to foster a deeper understanding of the stakes and possibilities of perpetrator studies. It encourages readers to critically assess their own assumptions about terms while engaging with two of the field's leading thinkers. In doing so, it underscores the importance of continual reflection and debate in the face of ever-evolving patterns of violence and oppression.

As editors, we hope this dialogue will inspire further scholarship and discussion. Whether one aligns more closely with Shaw's defence or Moses' critique, it is clear that the study of genocide – and therefore also the study of perpetration/perpetrators – remains a vital and dynamic field, one that demands constant reassessment in light of new evidence and perspectives.

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