Harming Others: The Dynamics of Everyday Aggression and Genocide

Michelle Gordon

Since the publication of Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992), genocide scholars and historians of the Holocaust have increasingly focused on the 'ordinary' perpetrators of genocide.[1] Israel Charny's starting point is also that the majority of perpetrators of genocide are 'normal' and, therefore, most of us would be capable of involving ourselves in genocide. As other scholars have concluded, Charny notes that, 'Murderous regimes never encounter a shortage of murderers!' (p. 72) and poses the questions: 'How could they do such a thing?' (p. 23) and 'who among us is psychologically capable of taking part in genocide, and who among us is not?' (p. 16). These questions are not new and Charny's approach is not unproblematic; throughout the book, issues of perpetration are often oversimplified and universalized. Charny considers a multifactor model of twelve 'foundations of evil in human nature', which he argues is based on behavioural dynamics that are apparent in all of us. These dynamics include scapegoating, 'going with the flow' and sacrificing the 'other'; Charny argues that these dynamics can be both positive and necessary up to a point, but, if taken to the extreme, they contribute to one's willingness to participate in genocide (see Chapter 2). He asserts that if 'we' are all capable of committing genocide, then there are mechanisms '*in all of us*', that, 'if not effectively controlled, can release our inner potential for evil' (p. 22, emphasis in original).

In terms of considering our own relationship with genocide and our potential to inflict harm upon others, Charny is certainly correct to encourage greater self-reflection. However, one problem with Charny's approach is his use of the term 'evil' to do so; he does not clarify what he means by this term, and its definition is deemed to be self-evident. Several scholars, including Inga Clendinnen, have called for the abandonment of the term, arguing that the concept of 'evil' is unhelpful with regards to

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1   Though Raul Hilberg had previously emphasized the ordinary nature of the perpetrators, stating for example that 'The German perpetrator was not a special kind of German': Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, rev. edn (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985), vol. 3, p. 1011. Later examples include *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

studying genocide perpetrators. Their objections include the lack of a concrete definition, and the use of the term to denote that which is deemed incomprehensible and thus, beyond explanation, thereby hampering — rather than encouraging — further enquiry, and contributing little to explaining the actions of genocide perpetrators.[2]

Charny provides examples of the above-mentioned behavioural dynamics both in everyday life and in the Holocaust and other cases of genocide. While Charny's inclusion of examples from a range of genocides is welcome, his references to examples of violence (not always genocide) are sometimes vague, and further context would have been needed to make the relevance of these examples clear. A case in point is Charny's mention of photographs taken in Kenya of inter-tribal violence in 2006, for which he provides no further context (p. 60). The book's intended readership includes students of Holocaust and Genocide Studies, but also everyday readers. However, some background knowledge is clearly necessary to make sense of Charny's often ambiguous examples and the links he is trying to make. Some analogies are more useful than others; for example, under the heading of '"Thinging" and Categorization' one example Charny provides is an airline's failure to provide a passenger whose flight has been cancelled with the next available flight. Directly below, Charny lists examples including the Nazi practice of tattooing victims with an identification number and the photographing of the victims of Tuol Sleng in Cambodia under Pol Pot (pp. 67–68). How is one to understand this leap? At the outset, Charny rightly states the importance of context and the conditions in which people commit genocide (p. 31); he makes use of the Milgram and Stanford Prison experiments and addresses issues of habituation and desensitization. However, the juxtaposition of these examples — a missed flight and atrocity photographs — suggests that all of these cases are in some way a violation of one's human rights, which is clearly an oversimplification of the issues at hand.

Charny has claimed that the book is 'about all of us human beings long before genocide takes place' and emphasizes the need to consider our own actions *before* genocide occurs.[3] Throughout the book the reader is invited to take part in fourteen independent studies in the form of learning exercises, and is encouraged to consider not only whether they might themselves participate in genocide, but also whether they would actively work to preserve life (p. 172). These exercises are formatted in a variety of ways. Some studies are simply a series of questions upon which one is encouraged to reflect, such as one's own willingness to humiliate or hurt others; other studies are based on ticking boxes within a table to indicate one's personal feelings towards dif-

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2   See Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Thomas W. Simon, 'Genocide, Evil, and Injustice: Competing Hells', in *Genocide and Human Rights: A Philosophical Guide*, ed. by John K. Roth (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 65–78.

3   Israel Charny, 'Announcement of New Book, "The Genocide Contagion"', *H-Genocide* (5 Sept., 2016), <https://networks.h-net.org/node/142249/pdf> [accessed 5 December 2017].

ferent groupings. While it is Charny's approach in this respect that offers something new, some of the exercises have wider applicability and relevance than others (subject to one's experience with war and threats of violence, for example). We are asked to list everyone we hate, or consider a range of ethnic groups and tick the appropriate box regarding our 'sense of distance or hatred', 'readiness to act forcefully to distance them', and 'readiness to use violence against them'. In terms of teaching, some of these studies may prove useful in encouraging students to think about their own behaviour towards others and their responsibility to act, though one would clearly have to proceed with caution. However, the question presents itself as to whether 'lessons' from genocide are the best approach in terms of making human beings more tolerant and 'nicer'.[4] At times, this book seems to be more about the implications of causing general harm to others than understanding genocide specifically, and Charny focuses on 'aggression' — although his 'foundations' do highlight many common attributes of genocide. Charny uses a broad definition of genocide (though no clear definition is provided), which emphasizes 'mass killing', 'excluding clearly justified military activities against an attacking enemy' (p. 17).[5] Even this definition is not as straightforward as it may sound, considering the relevance of perceived threats to national security and the role of fear to our understanding of genocide.[6] Indeed, Charny acknowledges that Nazi anti-Semitism contradictorily viewed 'the Jews' as both 'inferior' and an existential threat which forced them to act in 'self-defence against a dangerous enemy' (69).

The Genocide Contagion builds on Charny's previous work, which is based upon the premise that the diagnosis of 'abnormal' behaviour needs to consider not only the potential for self-harm, but also the willingness to harm others.[7] Charny's emphasis on genocide as 'cancer' and a 'contagion' is highlighted in the book's title, and is summarized by Yair Auron, who provides the Introduction: Charny's approach 'compares the processes that lead to genocide to a cancer that starts in one part of the body and spreads to and kills off other parts of the body as well… This may ultimately result not only in the destruction of parts of the body under attack but in the death of the organism as a whole' (p. 12). This is surely a problematic metaphor when one considers the language of *génocidaires* in relation to their victims and the ways in which genocide propaganda typically targets victims with such biological language (including the Nazis and the Khmer Rouge), deeming them to be 'parasites', 'vermin' or 'pests'

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4 See Donald Bloxham, 'Britain's Holocaust Memorial Days: Using the Past in the Service of the Present', *Immigrants and Minorities*, 21 (2003), 41–62.

5 Charny criticizes 'definitionalism' (p. 151). See also David Moshman, 'Conceptions of Genocide and Perceptions of History', in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. by Dan Stone (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 71–92.

6 See A. Dirk Moses, 'Moving the Genocide Debate beyond the History Wars', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 54 (2008), 248–70.

7 Israel W. Charny, *How Can We Commit the Unthinkable? Genocide: The Human Cancer* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982).

that need to be removed from the body politic.[8] Charny discusses the relevance of 'contagion' in his summary, considering the idea of genocide as part of a 'larger medical category of dangerous epidemics' (p. 162); members of the medical community have argued that genocide is 'the world's number one cause of unnatural death' (p. 161). However, recognizing genocidal processes as they unfold, as Charny acknowledges, is often not the issue; it is the inaction of the international community that needs to change. Whether perceiving genocide as a medical epidemic will have an effect in terms of an 'early warning' seems unlikely.

At times, it is clear that this book was first published in Hebrew and would benefit from some rephrasing in line with its intended purpose of encouraging a wider audience to consider these issues. Charny addresses Israeli Jews directly throughout and encourages them to look within themselves and challenge their relationship with violence, beyond that of historic victims. For example, he argues that the 'lesson which […] we Jews — who think highly of our culture as presenting advanced moral codes — must also internalize, is that all "normal" people have a potential to commit genocide that needs to be countered' (pp. 26–27). Charny demonstrates the tension regarding Israel's relationship with violence in the appendix entitled 'Studies on the Israeli Willingness to Commit Evil' and provides examples of war crimes committed by Israel. This inclusion serves as an important reminder that reflecting on acts of violence committed by the State of Israel need not amount to anti-Semitism. It is, of course, a tendency among nations to perceive one's own history as less violent than that of others; Israel is certainly not alone in this regard, and Charny states the need for us all to consider whether we or others within 'our nation' are capable of genocide (cf. p. 23).[9] As Charny's chapter on denial shows, an open dialogue regarding each nation's culpability in genocide and mass violence is essential.

Charny asks us to reflect on how we can be more humane on a day-to-day basis; he emphasizes moderation and stresses that 'Common sense tells us that too much of anything can lead to overload, outbursts, and collisions and that we must remain in control of our urges and experiences' (p. 41). Charny highlights the seemingly 'normal' attributes among human beings that, through radicalization, can contribute to one's decision to take part in genocidal violence, but how these dynamics and 'excesses' come together is unclear. How do we hold these dynamics in check? Charny states that it is not inevitable that we would all commit genocide in the 'correct' circumstances — as demonstrated by the 'Righteous people' who have risked their lives to save others. Charny raises the issue of resistance, but does not offer answers, advising

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8   See Marie Fleming, 'Genocide and the Body Politic in the Time of Modernity', in *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, ed. by Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 97–116 (p. 109).

9   With regard to Britain's relationship with genocide, see Martin Shaw, 'Britain and Genocide: Historical and Contemporary Parameters of National Responsibility', *Review of International Studies*, 37 (2011), 2417–38.

individuals to decide 'how far we should go to help others', ultimately leaving us to 'search our souls' (p. 93).

The author's central aim is 'to help readers understand the psychology of out-and-out genocide' and also to 'reveal the very "building blocks" of genocidal hate and destructiveness in our common daily lives' (p. 51), thus enabling us to ward off genocide and also 'contribute to much saner conduct in our everyday personal lives' (p. 51).[10] Charny is surely correct that many readers would claim that they have nothing to learn from the study, as they are certain that they would never harm another person (p. 127); it is not enough to simply conclude that 'we' would never act in the same way as others have when confronted with genocide. We should all reflect openly and honestly on how we behave daily as human beings and the independent studies ask some challenging questions in this regard. However, it is the circumstances in which a 'continuous radicalization' of behaviour takes place that we need to understand. One part of this endeavour is acknowledging each nation's role in violence and genocide. As Charny states, 'Very few countries, in the world, including the world's democracies, are untainted by genocidal bloodshed' (p. 23).

Michelle Gordon has recently completed a PhD in History at Royal Holloway, University of London, UK. Email: michellelgordon@hotmail.co.uk

10 While Charny criticizes academia and specifically 'professional' and 'intellectual assassinations' in his book, he has also embroiled himself in controversy, having written a bizarre piece against the respected *Journal of Genocide Research*. See Israel W. Charny, 'Holocaust Minimization, Anti-Israel Themes, and Antisemitism: Bias at the *Journal of Genocide Research*', *Journal for the Study of Antisemitism*, 7 (2016), 1–28. In a rebuttal of his accusations, Amos Goldberg and others have understandably accused him of 'character assassination'; see Amos Goldberg et al, 'Israel Charny's Attack on the *Journal of Genocide Research* and Its Authors: A Response', *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 2 (2016), 3–22.