

The significance of fear in ethnic conflict and genocide

Dangerous Emotions



LECH M. NIJAKOWSKI

Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw

Collegium Civitas, PAS

nijakowskil@is.uw.edu.pl

Dr. Lech M. Nijakowski is currently studying acts of revenge against Germans since the Second World War from the perspective of genocide research

Sociology regards emotions not just as a simple expression of human biology, but as social constructs shaped through interactions with others

We are all fully aware of the importance of emotions – both positive and negative – in our everyday lives. Without them we would not perform many actions, both those which we view positively in hindsight, as well as those we feel embarrassed about. Traditionally emotions have been considered a subject of study for psychology, including social psychology. Sociology, on the other hand, disregarded the significance of emotions for a long time, with any discussion relying on research conducted in social psychology. This also applies to the sociology of conflict. Only recently did emotions become of interest to sociologists, leading to the development of the field of sociology of emotions, which devotes significant attention to studying how ethnic conflicts arise and how they can be solved. It seeks to identify the social, structural determinants of human emotions.

Theodore D. Kemper has described a method for sociological explanation of the arousal of specific emotions, seeing the sources of emotions in the real or imagined results of social interaction. According to Kemper, positive emotions are generated through increasing power and status, negative emotions by decreasing power and status. He maintains that anger results from loss of status, fear is caused by a loss of power in relation to others, sadness is the result of an irreversible loss of status,

and happiness stems from increased status. In Kemper's view these are the four basic emotions.

Conflict is something that has been studied by sociology since the field's inception. Sociological methods have been used to try to explain conflicts rooted in class, nationality, ethnicity, and race. Studies into genocide have developed into a separate field, aiming to explain one of the most extraordinary aspects of collective violence: the intent to exterminate an entire social group, paying no heed to its members' sex, age, or status. The twentieth century has been described as "a century of wars," although a more apt term might be "a century of genocides." Sticking just to genocides proper (rather than genocidal massacres, where the aim is to eliminate a significant portion of a population in order to permanently undermine its status), we can say that the 20th century started with the massacre of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire (1915-1916; 1-1.5 million victims), followed by the Nazi genocides (1941-1945, focusing on Jews and Roma; 6 million), and concluded with the Rwandan massacres (6 April-July 1994), resulting in the murder of 500-800,000 Tutsi and Twa (pygmies).

Pride and shame

Emotions are a kind of energy that generates social bonds, although they can also mobilize people to commit acts of collective violence against another group. Of course, we should be careful not to generalize emotions to a societal level – a nation per se cannot be ashamed or proud of its own past. However, it is possible to identify certain stable patterns defining the emotions and ideas of group members, similar to a "collective memory" – meaning not some kind of awareness of a collective past that exists outside the individuals, but a certain collection of images of the past and ways of talking about it which dominate in a given society. Such knowledge and attitudes can be studied qualitatively and quantitatively, for example with representative samples on a national scale.



Krzysztof Miller/Agencja Gazeta

In genocides, fear of loss of security and well being coexist together. Refugee camp in Kisangani, Democratic Republic of Congo

Despite what is maintained in liberal discourse, which stresses that there is no such thing as collective blame or merit and only individuals' actions can and should be judged, collective pride and shame are basic notions found in everyday thinking. Thomas J. Scheff argues that pride is a positive emotion which provides a basis for healthy social relations. Similarly, recognized and acknowledged shame allows us to self-correct our behavior and rebuild ties based on trust. In turn, unrecognized and unacknowledged shame is the basis for escalation of conflict. However, let us leave such other emotions to one side and focus on fear and anxiety.

Fear and anxiety vs. conflict

According to many theories, fear and anxiety are key emotions leading to the escalation of conflict. Anxiety is an indefinite sense of threat, while fear is caused by a specific trigger. In the absence of any limitations, fear should lead to flight. This emotion has played an important role in evolution (a problem being investigated by evolutionary psychology). It might seem that fear should exist only among defeated victims; that it should lead to opposition against the starting of warfare. However, fear in fact plays a key role in the development of many ethnic conflicts and genocides. Instituting just the right levels of fear in a society is an excellent mechanism for mobilizing individuals to fight an enemy, in particular since nagging, unspecified social fears become more tangible when projected

onto a specific group. It is no accident that the term "politics of fear" has gained popularity nowadays.

This is presented well by Stuart J. Kauffman's theory of symbolic politics leading to ethnic wars. He sees the following as conditions necessary for an outbreak of ethnic war: myths aiming to justify hostility, a fear of losing domination, of being a target of revenge, or of becoming demographically dominated, and an opportunity to mobilize and fight (an absence of institutional barriers, support from a foreign patron, level of economic development, etc.). Ethnic wars break out when mass hostility towards another nation surges, when leaders whip up jingoistic sentiment using symbolism and myths, when "security dilemmas" arise between hostile groups. A security dilemma (a political science term) arises when the rhetoric and actions of one side, wishing to secure its position and gain domination by peaceful means, trigger an increased sense of threat and increased counteraction in another, hostile group, which then conversely confirms the first group's sense of threat, leading to open conflict. The tragic "dilemma" is that the groups are motivated by their respective mythologies to define security in mutually exclusive ways.

War may be caused by the actions of mass-manipulating elites, or by pressure from the broader masses. In the first instance, political leaders wishing to achieve their own specific goals practice black propaganda, manipulate ethnic symbols, aim to stoke up ethnic hostility against another group they define using myths,

The significance of fear in ethnic conflict and genocide

and stress the threats posed by the hostile nation. In the second instance, when hostility levels are already high, myths justifying group solidarity and identifying threats to the group's survival start being expressed publically, mobilizing politicians, creating nationalistic drives, and giving rise to a security dilemma. Those factors become self-reinforcing and feed into one another, leading to the escalation of hostility. Kauffman sees the wars in the former Yugoslavia and in Moldova as examples of the former type, with the Armenia-Azerbaijan and Georgia-Abkhaz conflicts in the Caucasus which arose after the disintegration of the USSR representing the latter type.

The above logic helps explain why people are prepared to fight in ethnic wars: they are frightened and convinced that their group's dominance is crucial for its very survival. This way of thinking helps justify killing or even massacring the hated enemy. Kauffman states that ethnic violence always has a defensive motivation. It is clear that in this light fear becomes the basic emotion leading to ethnic wars, although it is not sufficient to fully explain them.

Hate speech

In modern societies, political discourse rouses widespread emotions. We are afraid of an enemy we have never met, or feel solidarity with our compatriots from a region we have never seen. According to Benedict Anderson, modern nations are "imagined communities." It is through political discourse that myths are relayed and augmented, and that mass changes of attitudes, categorizations, and emotions take place. The most concise definition of discourse is text put into context. Discourse is propagated not just through published books or propaganda, but also through the reenactment of social practices, customs, and institutions. As such it is discourse that carries the substance and means of expression that perpetuate our vision of the world. For a sociologist it is not important whether a given group was really under threat or if its fear of outsiders was justified; rather, the widely-perceived "definitions of situations" are of greater importance. The Nazis, including Hitler himself, were deeply convinced that the policies of the Allies against the Third Reich were dictated by Jewish circles, which allegedly demanded the bombardment of strategic German cities. This may be a mere curiosity

from a historical perspective, but as it was the prevailing explanation of the situation at the time, it defined the dynamics of the final phase of the Holocaust.

It is essential to stir negative emotions against the potential enemy in order to incite fear. A common approach that attempts to explain conflict by referring to "eternal hatred" is usually wrong, since it does not provide any explanation for periods of peace and the attendant assimilation. A good example of such bad practice is its common application to explaining the Rwandan genocide. In this context it is worth mentioning a specific type of public discourse, known as "hate speech." It involves assigning negative qualities to and/or calling for discrimination and hostility against certain social groups, especially those whose members are seen as belonging to them "by nature" rather than by choice. Mounting use of hate speech, exploiting and reinstilling the myth of the enemy and threat to the nation, touches off fear, aggression and the desire to retain or obtain domination. According to Helen Fein, a famous genocide scholar, the enemy is demonized to the point of "exclusion from the world of moral obligations." Hate speech is an extremely important factor in mobilizing people to fight and maintaining morale during ethnic wars or genocides. This is why it is essential to combat it in everyday life.

Fearful genocide

There is no such thing as specific "genocidal emotions." Genocide is arrived at through the same emotions as interpersonal aggression. Fear plays a key role in both cases. Historical

Łódź Ghetto, 1943.
Intersection of Zgierska
and Podrzeczna Streets
(United States Holocaust
Museum)





Warsaw Ghetto Uprising - Jürgen Stroop Report/Wikipedia Commons

Warsaw Ghetto uprising.
 Artur Dab Siemiatek or
 Lewi Zelinwarger or Cwi
 Nussbaum, plus Hanka
 Lamet, Matylda Lamet
 Goldfinger (Hanka's
 mother), Leo Kartuziński,
 and Golda Stawarowska

examples of genocide generally involve fear of a threat to security as well as to wellbeing (we can analogously call this the “wellbeing dilemma”). Naturally, fear alone does not constitute a security or wellbeing dilemma. The two can coexist, as was the case of the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994. Equally, the perpetrators cannot be regarded as a homogenous group.

A security dilemma, fuelling the antagonism between the victims and the perpetrators, has been present in all cases of total genocides and genocidal massacres (with the exception of the Congo Free State between 1885-1908 and the extermination of the Australian Aborigines; in both those examples only the wellbeing dilemma was present). For example, the Turks were afraid of the Tsarist armies supported by the Armenians and the Armenian “fifth column,” while the Hutu were afraid of revenge from the Rwandan Patriotic Front comprising the Tutsi. It may seem strange, but people who engage in genocides are not some kind of “subhuman demons” – they are frequently terrified people who believe that only murdering their enemy can guarantee lasting peace for their families and national communities.

Politics of fear

Emotions are a specific social fact – by acting, each individual believes that the emotions they are experiencing originate entirely from within themselves, that they represent their own personal component

of social activities, although of course they arise in response to environmental impulses. Emotions seem entirely natural – generally we do not notice their social constructs, and as such their degree of arbitrariness. The pressures exerted on an individual by their emotions are expressed to them entirely internally, as a manifestation of their own personality. This is why it is so much easier to manipulate individuals on an emotional than ideological level. By stirring fear, it is possible to coerce “ordinary citizens” to murder men, women and children. They believe they are fulfilling their patriotic duty by doing so. This is why the politics of fear is especially dangerous for world peace, in particular when it concerns other racial or ethnic communities. ■

Further reading:

- Barbalet J. (Ed.). (2002). *Emotions and Sociology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bloxham D., Dirk Moses A. (Ed.). (2010). *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kauffman S.J. (2001). *Modern Hatreds. The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press.
- Nijkowski L.M. (2009). *Grzeczni ludobójcy. Dobrze wychowani obywatele w służbie zbiorowej przemocy*. [W:] Kowalski P. (Red.). *Tabu, etykieta, dobre obyczaje*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 257-278.
- Turner J.H., Stets J.E. (2005). *The Sociology of Emotions*. Cambridge: CUP