

Emotions and Mass Atrocity: Philosophical and Theoretical Explanations

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Never has the extraordinarily rich literature on mass atrocity seemed more relevant as ongoing reports from around the world remind us that we live in an age of genocide. This vast repertoire of scholarly work can appear at maximum capacity with countless overarching theoretical frameworks of mass violence. However, bold and imaginative new works such as *Emotions and Mass Atrocity: Philosophical and Theoretical Explorations* demonstrate that our understanding is far from complete. While scholars make frequent reference to the centrality of emotions - such as fear, hatred, horror, anger and shame - in mass atrocity, few serious attempts have been made to examine emotions as a lens through which to study this phenomenon. In recent years, emotions have increasingly been the focus of historical research and *Emotions and Mass Atrocity* is a much-welcome and long-awaited contribution to the literature. In editing this book, Thomas Brudholm and Johannes Lang provide an important starting point for thinking seriously about emotions in the context of mass atrocity. While readers may be relative newcomers to either the study of emotion *or* mass atrocity, this book strikes a fine balance between both. Scholars from all fields concerned with the study of mass atrocity, and especially historians, will benefit from the philosophical and theoretical discussions in this book.

In this collection of essays, the editors have brought together a broad array of interests and expertise to present a compelling case for the need to examine the multiple emotions involved in mass atrocity. The freedom given to contributors within the overall structure of the volume means that it can either be comfortably read in its entirety or dipped into for specific chapters that can stand alone; this makes it a useful source for seminar teaching. This compact volume is divided into three sections that map roughly onto the chronology of the genocide process. Part one examines emotion's central role in the 'Causes and dynamics' of mass atrocities. Part two, entitled 'Emotional responses', focuses on both specific emotions as well as affects and sentiments in political and humanitarian responses to atrocity violence. Part three, 'Repair and commemoration', analyses the significance of emotions in remembrance and healing in the aftermath of atrocity. The 13 chapters are bound broadly around a common goal to explore the key role played by emotions in different aspects of mass atrocity. As a result, historians focussing on the origins of genocidal

violence, for instance, may find the first two parts to be most relevant; those interested in reconciliation and post-conflict settings might benefit more from the final part.

Notably, there is some overlap between the various authors in their examination of specific emotions. Discussions of shame, for example, occur in three chapters (seven, nine and 13); though, this may also be a result of the fluidity of emotions themselves, as they do not fit neatly into distinct categories. In addition, critics could justifiably take issue with the extent to which the Holocaust and particularly a few, select memoirists such as Primo Levi are relied upon in several essays. For a work titled as broadly as *Emotions and Mass Atrocity*, there could be more comparative application to different historical contexts other than the Holocaust (particularly in the first two parts of the book), though a few contributors do draw from a wider range of historical examples.

In their introduction, Brudholm and Lang contend that in order to understand moral, political and historical upheavals like Nazism and the Holocaust, one must also understand the intense emotions they engendered. The authors present their main case: emotions literally move people to action, and therefore ‘scholars cannot truly understand historical change – or the institutions, ideas, and actions of historically turbulent periods – without considering the role of emotions’ (p. 8). The authors examine the reasons why emotions have been marginalised in the study of mass atrocity. The Holocaust and Nazism played a crucial role in maligning reference to the biological or internal human dynamics in explanatory frameworks of human behaviour. This was especially the case in research attempting to explain mass violence, and unfortunately, with this halted the study of emotions (p. 4). Another obstacle has been the debate over whether emotions are rational or irrational. Instead, Brudholm and Lang establish, ‘the central point for us is not so much whether cognition causes emotion or emotion cognition, but rather that the two are enmeshed and irreducible to one or the other’ (pp. 6-7). The authors also suggest that emotions ‘have a momentum and a life of their own’ (p. 8), though unfortunately this point is not expanded further.

Classicist David Konstan begins part one with a fantastic essay exploring mass atrocity in classical antiquity. It begins by illustrating how some primary emotions involved in both ancient and modern genocide (hatred, anger, fear and pity) were understood and experienced entirely differently. According to Aristotle, a certain moral logic underscored these emotions as felt by Ancient Greeks. This logic could be used by architects of atrocities to justify their actions through emotions experienced against particular groups. Yet, ancient mass exterminations were not genocidal in the modern sense because hated groups were not defined by modern ideas of race, religion, nationality or ethnicity. Instead, ‘a more casual attitude to mass extermination obviated the need for the demonization of the enemy’; no Geneva and Hague Conventions regulated the conduct of warfare, and ‘accusations of treachery sufficed to rouse the indignation needed to murder whole populations guiltlessly’ (pp. 40-1). Konstan perceptively suggests that no need existed for modern vocabularies of racial contamination nor dehumanising propaganda in antiquity because the moral logic of emotions that justified atrocious violence was broadly accepted. It would, however, be interesting if Konstan elaborated on quite how broad this acceptance was across the societies he studies.

The emotions of fear and hope that lie at the core of the formation of genocidal intent - the intent to destroy a group in whole or in part - is examined by political scientist Neta Crawford. She argues that there exist three vital ingredients in the origins of a genocidal mentality: the first is the institutionalisation of the emotions of hope and fear; the second is a political legitimisation crisis; and finally, an underlying militaristic culture that believes in violence as the principal means to achieve its ends (p. 46). While her theory does not exactly break new ground, it persuasively and coherently highlights the role of emotions within the planning stage of genocide. There are, however, some points in the essay that could have benefited from more explanation. For example, it is stated that 'fear is the source of the hate that is mobilised to engage "ordinary" people in genocidal acts' and to garner their support for the political regime (p. 47). In addition, 'the propagandists of genocide believe their own propaganda' (p. 47). Yet, it is not entirely clear from the analysis how the emotionally genuine and the politically pragmatic elements of genocide come together. Moreover, are we to assume that emotions, such as fear and hope, were felt uniformly by both Crawford's elites and the ordinary people mobilised for genocide?

Johannes Lang provides a stimulating insight into the role of pride within the psychology of genocide. Many scholars, such as Raul Hilberg, Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman, have emphasised the rational hardness of Nazism and the impersonal, bureaucratic implementation of the Holocaust. For Lang, this obscures the central role emotions played. Heinrich Himmler's insistence on the importance of 'hardness' demonstrated a sincere respect for the power of emotions (p. 70). At Nazism's core was an exclusionary variant of pride, which inhibited bonds from forming between perpetrators and their victims; instead, pride inspired contempt and indifference towards their suffering. Lang then broadens his analysis by highlighting pride's role in giving emotional weight to Nazism's 'ideological delusions', and in its 'excessively arrogant form of hubris' Hitler's pride encouraged him to plan the annihilation of Europe's Jews (p. 80). Thomas Brudholm and Birgitte Schepelern Johansen move the discussion from pride to hatred. The authors interestingly attempt to identify and locate hatred. As an emotion, hatred 'requires an embodied, intentional, feeling subject', they argue (p. 97). But material objects and physical spaces 'can store and distribute narratives of hatred'; 'they may facilitate the categorization of people that are objects of hatred', as well as creating structures and conditions for hatred's continuity (p. 101). Hatred can be whimsical and arise suddenly without warning and appear impervious to reason; but it can also be incited, nurtured, appeased, and sustained. The irrational and rational sides of the emotion of hatred are thus both cause and effect, revolving around one another.

In chapter six, Arne Johan Vetlesen discusses the way perpetrators are studied in the social sciences. The chapter is primarily a critique of Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai's *Virtuous Violence*⁽¹⁾, which is perceived to exemplify lamentable tropes within the literature on mass violence. For example, numerous authors purporting to present comprehensive frameworks for understanding human violence often exclude one of two principal actors in violent interactions: the victims. For Vetlesen, this constitutes a 'double silencing' (p. 107): firstly, victims are excluded from the historical narrative; and, secondly, by doing so the authors inadvertently continue the aims of the perpetrators (p. 106-7). Equally striking is Vetlesen's argument that we have no reason to take seriously what perpetrators say because they tend to morally excuse their own immoral acts (p. 109). While it is correct that we should not assume what perpetrators say is true, scholars are seldom as uncritical as Vetlesen makes out. In a similar way, Daniel Goldhagen suggested that because perpetrator testimonies are problematic, 'the only methodological position that makes any sense is to discount *all* self-exculpating testimony that finds no corroboration from other sources'.⁽²⁾ Christopher Browning, on the other hand, demonstrated that perpetrator testimony can be immensely valuable sources of historical evidence if used carefully and *critically*.⁽³⁾ Vetlesen acknowledges that a focus on perpetrators resulted from the realisation of the ordinariness of most perpetrators of mass violence (p. 111). Indeed, it was the careful study of perpetrator testimonies that first revealed the banality of evil, which in turn highlighted the need for further study of perpetrator perspectives and the structures they operated in. Vetlesen's philosophical background perhaps explains why he so fiercely criticises the lack of moralisation in the writing of mass atrocity, urging scholars to 'break the moralization taboo that is now so much an internalized feature of such studies' (p. 119). It is unclear, however, how such a development would bring

about a better understanding of the complicity of 'ordinary' people in mass atrocity. Nevertheless, Vetlesen's thought-provoking criticisms are worth consideration for researchers of mass atrocity, especially those whose work relies on perpetrator testimony.

Part two, entitled 'Emotional Responses' begins with Adriana Cavarero's discussion of horror. Horror has a paralyzing effect and those who survived horror's ultimate manifestation, Auschwitz, consequently 'cannot find effective words or categories to *explain it*' (pp. 128-9). Indeed, this is a struggle survivor-memoirists, such as Primo Levi, have often noted. Cavarero then illustrates horror's relationship with shame, arguing that we, as humans, feel shame when we witness horror (p. 136). To explain why those most deserving of shame (perpetrators) are often least affected by it, it is tenuously suggested that unashamed perpetrators had been dehumanised by the horror of their acts (p. 137). Levi famously noted that any attempt to conflate perpetrators with their victims 'is a moral disease'.⁽⁴⁾ Yet, to dehumanise perpetrators overlooks the fundamentally human character of mass atrocity and the emotions central to it, which the contributors of this volume so persuasively highlight.

In one of the best essays of the volume, Ditte Marie Munch-Jurisc examines perpetrator disgust. Rejecting the dichotomous view of disgust as either a moral emotion or an amoral one, it is argued that disgust is better understood as a destructive emotion. When perpetrators feel disgust, they are rarely inspired to moral action; conversely, she argues,

'they are primarily motivated to find ways to overcome the disgust, which they tend to identify as an emotional weakness. The perpetrator's response to his feeling of disgust therefore often results not in a decrease but in an increase of violence' (p. 143).

However, we are encouraged not to assume that there is no moral response in perpetrator disgust, especially given the great lengths perpetrator organisations go to in controlling their soldiers' 'conflicting emotions about killing' (p. 158). One method well-known to scholars of mass atrocity is dehumanisation of members of a target group. Disgust is central to this process; since disgust responses distance people from objects of disgust, it is consequently harder to empathise with them (p. 157). Nazi propaganda compared Jews to rats; the intentionally harsh conditions in the camps and ghettos – where Jews were deprived not just of their rights, but also of basic hygiene – resulted in inmates who resembled the propagandistic portrayals of victims as subhuman in the eyes of their perpetrators. Munch-Jurisc concludes her brilliant chapter by arguing that 'in these contexts, disgust is highly ineffective as a moral response and highly effective in cultivating a genocidal mentality' (p. 160).

Philosophers Alba Montes Sánchez and Dan Zahavi move the discussion to the phenomenon of survivor shame. The authors rightly argue that understanding survivor shame is crucial to comprehending an important aspect of the harm inflicted by atrocity violence onto its victims. The authors conclude by elegantly and optimistically suggesting what survivor shame perhaps attests to:

'in situations of extreme coercion, where even the most basic moral behaviour becomes heroic, the normativity of what we owe to each other still asserts itself, and no degree of coercion can be experienced as a valid excuse for letting certain things happen' (p. 183).

Closing part two, Andrew Ross discusses the emotional processes involved in the humanitarian politics of genocide. Ross avoids the error frequently made by scholars in characterising genocide exclusively as a legal concept or as a humanitarian issue. Rather, 'beyond its legal existence, "genocide" is an emotional machine with potential to summon specific repertoires of emotional expression' (p. 199). This emotional potential presents opportunities for other issues, political and cultural, to become fused with the sentiments and symbols traditionally associated with humanitarianism. Because the application of emotional responses, such as compassion, bear no necessary connection to the underlying stimulus giving rise to it, affects can migrate from one issue to another (p. 202).

Part three, entitled 'Repair and commemoration', focuses on the role of emotions in the aftermath of mass atrocity. Margaret Urban Walker begins the final section with a discussion of hope. Walker acknowledges that discussing hope in a genocidal context may be perceived as dangerously complacent or offensively irrelevant in the face of an event that so consciously seeks to destroy hope in its victims (p. 221). Walker argues that practical responses, such as reparations and peace-building initiatives, are vital steps in reigniting a sense of hope for genocide victims, one that atrocity violence can extinguish. Jeffrey Blustein brings the focus onto traumatic emotions and their impact on the traumatised. Remembrance of mass atrocity, in both individual and collective memories, has profoundly therapeutic potential. If post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an affliction of how trauma is remembered, then reorganising and fitting an individual's trauma or a nation's traumatic past into a consistent narrative, rather than forgetting it, is crucial to healing trauma's effects in post-atrocity life (pp. 252-4).

The final chapter of the book is Nir Eisikovits's insightful and captivating discussion of embarrassment in addressing political injustice and mass atrocities. Drawing on a number of well-chosen historical examples, from the Cold War to Apartheid, he argues that embarrassment - 'the fear of appearing inconsistent or ridiculous' - has the capacity to motivate political action (p. 262). While states do not always prioritise *being* virtuous, they take a strong interest in *appearing* virtuous. States frequently disguise realist intentions in moralistic rhetorical justifications. Yet when these intentions are exposed for what they really are, the actors involved often become embarrassed, which in turn 'may prompt them to start acting according to the motivations they publicly professed' (p. 267). For Eisikovits, any effective strategy of embarrassment relies on identifying and exploiting two key elements: firstly, 'which aspects of political identity matter most', and secondly, 'which observers' judgements matter most' (p. 272). Moreover, embarrassment is so effective because 'it uses a moral and cultural standard that is internal to the target group' (p. 274). This chapter draws the book to an optimistic endnote: no regime is immune to embarrassment regardless of how robust it appears. Wherever propaganda is employed, we know the regime is worried about having its true nature exposed (p. 273).

Overall, *Emotions and Mass Atrocity* makes a highly convincing case for the need to take emotions seriously in the study of mass atrocity, as well as in historical research more generally. Despite the criticisms in this review, Brudholm and Lang bring together an excellent collection of innovative and thought-provoking research. Indeed, the work is another successful example of the value that interdisciplinarity can bring to academic study. The authors persuasively challenge conventional understanding about a phenomenon that has been heavily researched; this is no small achievement. Finally, the volume successfully illustrates why we should view emotions 'as the powerful moral, political, and historical forces that they are' (p. 8).

Notes

1. Alan P. Fiske and Taze S. Rai, *Virtuous Violence* (Cambridge, 2015).[Back to \(1\)](#)
 1. Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, NY, 1997), p. 471.[Back to \(2\)](#)
 1. See Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (London, 1992).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 1. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, (London, 1989), p. 48.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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