

# **On the Study of Riots, Pogroms, and Genocide**

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The study of the various forms of mass collective violence has been blighted by methodological deficiencies and ideological premises that are as endemic to the contemporary social sciences as are riots in many of the societies we study. Indeed, it often seems that, as with so much other social science work, our purpose is to display our theoretical skills rather than to expose to view the dynamic processes that produce the phenomena we study. Our work then becomes entangled—even through the very theories we articulate—in the diversionary tactics that are essential to the production and reproduction of violence.

## ***Labels***

The diversionary process begins with the issue of labelling, which itself is part of the process of production and reproduction of violence, and the post-hoc search for causes. We must know what we are studying before we can make the necessary generalizations, so the argument runs. So, we must distinguish clearly all the different forms of violence, from quarrels, feuds, vendettas, and other local manifestations of violence to the larger forms of riots, pogroms, and genocide. However, the producers of violence are themselves engaged in the same process and they continually outpace and outwit us, producing new and varied forms of collective violence, new “repertoires,” to use the Tilly-Tarrow term, that lead us into the game itself rather than providing us a site

for a distant gaze. Pogromists insist that the violence that has just occurred is nothing more than a riot. Genocidal acts are labelled by their perpetrators as merely spontaneous revenge and retaliation by justly and excusably outraged members of a group, acting spontaneously against an “other” group whose members have misbehaved.

Of course, once immersed in the observation of forms of collective violence, we social scientists must decide for ourselves whether we are witnessing something better labeled a pogrom than a riot, a massacre of innocents rather than a fair fight between groups, a genocide rather than a “mere” pogrom. We then, unavoidably, necessarily, become embroiled within and take a position upon the events we study. But this should be done knowingly and purposely without hiding behind the veil of the neutral social scientist searching impassionately for precision and for causation. Our main job, however, should be not to classify and to label precisely, but to expose to view the dynamics of violence and the ways in which each new large event of collective violence is, in fact, different from all others that have preceded it because of the very fact that its producers know very well what it is that they do, what has happened before, how to displace blame from themselves to others.

### ***Riots and Pogroms***

Consider first the production of riots and pogroms. The first carries the appearance of spontaneous, intergroup mass action, the second of deliberately organized—and especially—state-supported killings and the destruction of property of a targeted group. In fact, however, no hard and fast distinction can be made between these supposedly distinct forms of violence, since pogroms masquerade as riots and many, if not most, large-scale riots display features supposedly special to pogroms. Rather, it is necessary to examine the dynamic processes of the production of such violence and to note how the act of labelling enters into it.

I have argued that, in places where events labelled as riots are endemic, they have, in effect, become a grisly form of dramatic production in which there are three phases: preparation/rehearsal, activation/enactment, and explanation/interpretation.<sup>1</sup> In these sites of endemic riot production, preparation and rehearsal are continuous activities. Activation or enactment of a large-scale riot takes place under particular circumstances, often in a context of intense political mobilization or electoral competition in which riots are precipitated as a device to consolidate the support of ethnic, religious, or other culturally marked groups, by emphasizing the need for solidarity in face of the rival communal group. The third phase follows after the violence in a broader struggle to control the explanation or interpretation of the causes of the violence. In this phase, many other elements in society become involved, including journalists, politicians, social scientists, and public opinion generally.

At first, multiple narratives vie for primacy in controlling the explanation of violence. On the one hand, the predominant social forces attempt to insert an explanatory narrative into the prevailing discourse of order, while others seek to establish a new consensual hegemony that upsets existing power relations, that is, those which accept the violence as spontaneous, religious or ethnic, mass-based, unpredictable, and impossible to prevent or control fully. This third phase is also marked by a process of blame displacement, in which social scientists themselves become implicated, a process that fails to isolate effectively those most responsible for the production of violence, and instead diffuses blame widely, blurring responsibility, and thereby contributing to the perpetuation of violent productions in future, as well as the order that sustains them. In this phase also, the issue of labelling becomes decisive. Was it a spontaneous mass action between ethnic or religious groups locked in a web of mutual antagonisms said to have a long history or a pogrom organized by known organizations or the state or both, with the help of the police?

In my work on India, I have argued that what are labelled Hindu-Muslim riots have, more often than not, been turned into pogroms and massacres of Muslims, in which few Hindus are killed. In fact, in sites of endemic rioting, there exist what I have called “institutionalized riot systems,” in which the organizations of militant Hindu nationalism are deeply implicated. I believe that such riot systems exist and have existed in many other places in the world, at least for the past two centuries, including in Russia, other parts of Europe, and the United States. In such sites, persons can be identified, who play specific roles in the preparation, enactment, and explanation of riots after the fact. Especially important are what I call the “fire tenders,” who keep intergroup tensions alive through various inflammatory and inciting acts; “conversion specialists,” who lead and address mobs of potential rioters and give a signal to indicate if and when violence should commence; criminals and the poorest elements in society, recruited and rewarded for enacting the violence; and politicians and the vernacular media who, during the violence, and in its aftermath, draw attention away from the perpetrators of the violence by attributing it to the actions of an inflamed mass public. When successful, as it most often is, the principal beneficiaries of this process of blame displacement are the government and its political leaders, under whose watch such violence occurs. Here also, in the aftermath, social scientists become involved when they draw attention to the difficulties of “governance” in societies where interethnic and intercommunal animosities are allegedly rampant. They themselves then become implicated in a political discourse that, as Baxi has well put it, concerns itself with “the agonies of governance,” rather than with the “suffering” of the victims of misgovernance, and thereby normalizes the violence against its victims.<sup>2</sup>

## **Genocide**

Genocide studies too suffer from several defects that compromise the systematic study of its origins, the dynamic processes by which it is produced, contained, or

prevented. These defects include excessive argument over labelling, a narrowed focus on uncovering previously unknown or little known sites of genocide, and forms of causal analysis that involve little more than heavy-handed laying of blame upon a particular or general source: the state, a leader, a whole people.

The argument over labelling is the most debilitating. It is really a struggle for territory, for the right to make a claim of utmost suffering and victimhood for a people, or to extend the claim to encompass a wider range of sufferers. It is to that extent a political rather than a scientific struggle—for attention to one's cause—in which historians themselves become enmeshed.

The narrow focus on exposing to view particular sites of genocide previously neglected has merit and is necessary, but it often gives the appearance more of a prosecutor's amassing of evidence for a jury, in this case world opinion.

Causal analyses that focus upon the German or Turkish state, Hitler or Pol Pot, the German people as a whole and their accomplice peoples in eastern Europe either narrow the gaze too finely or extend it too broadly. The same considerations apply to the arguments over the responsibilities of Roosevelt or Churchill for failing to prevent, to save, to destroy. Too often such analyses provide a halo over the head of the analyst who never asks himself or herself what, where, how he or she would have, could have behaved differently.

It is certainly necessary to strive for as accurate a determination of responsibilities as possible in each case, to distinguish among murderers, accomplices, and the merely silent observers or those who say they did not know. It is also appropriate to note the falsifications in speech and hypocritical acts in practice that are part of the process of producing violence. But there is a difference between establishing responsibility for a specific action or non-action—identifying it, delimiting it—and blaming. Although, of course, blame involves fixing responsibility, when it comes to broader social processes it

does more in practice: it frees others from responsibility. So, with regard to the assignment of responsibility, it is obviously the task of scholarly observers to be precise and careful. In contrast, the assignment of blame is something rather to be observed as part of the process of production of violence, which takes place after the fact and, insofar as it blames others, justifies the non-actions of those not blamed, and frees from responsibility individuals, organizations, groups, even multitudes whose degrees of responsibility are thereby missed.

Genocide, like riots and pogroms, takes many forms, of which the Holocaust, though the most extreme in history, is unique not only in its extent, but in its form. Excessive quarreling over whether such and such a people deserve to have their misfortunes rank with those of the Jews of Europe divert attention from the analytic task of discerning how, even now, genocidal acts are produced as a regular form of mass killings. In fact, I have argued that there are other forms of genocide that deserve particular notice, particularly of the mutual and retributive type,<sup>3</sup> a form of violence that develops in stages that constitute clear danger signals. They include the following: 1) the use of categorical definitions to define a population as entitled to dominate a particular politico-geographical space; 2) the consequent disregard of the interests of interspersed populations not included in the definitions, who may find violence their last resort; 3) the breakdown of intercommunal or interethnic linkages, especially political ones, and the consequent communalization of politics, followed by political polarization and political stalemate; 4) the rise to leadership positions of persons who, in euphemistic terms or openly, espouse violence against a rival community or ethnic group; 5) the deliberate use of violence to achieve political ends, including premonitory, planned riots and pogroms, sometimes coming in waves or covering a large territory; 6) escalation in the brutality and scale of violence and in its forms, including, sexual abuse of women and sadistic violence perpetrated for the sheer joy of it; 7) attacks so extensive and extreme as to lead

to displacement of tens of thousands of people, turning them into refugees; 8) increase in the ratio of killings to injuries; 9) deliberate use of violence as a mechanism of ethnic cleansing; 10) transgressing of traditional boundaries by targeting women and children, whole communities of people; 10) use of rape, as a substitute for killing, as a device to reproduce one's own in the body of the other and deny to the other community the prospect of reproduction; 11) intensification of group solidarity and intergroup division produced by the violence, leading to increased mass participation for defense and revenge and retaliation, that is to say, a complete release of passion; 12) increasing partiality of the police, their aiding and abetting of one side or the other or both, presaging a complete disintegration of all external restraints upon the illegitimate use of violence.

In short, in all cases of large-scale collective violence, we need to be attentive not only to the action taking place, but to the discourse about it. We need to note the phases and stages of production of collective violence and the deliberate testing of boundaries that takes place in their production, the actions that confound our labels, the transgressions that signal the movement from one extreme form of violence to another, even more extreme form. We need finally to pay attention to the talk that takes place afterwards, including our own, that obfuscates rather than enlightens, that seeks precise definition and "causes" rather than exposure of what is concealed, that contributes to the persistence of violence by hiding more than it reveals.

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<sup>1</sup> The theoretical framework in this essay is elaborated more fully in Paul R. Brass, *Theft of an Idol* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997) and *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, forthcoming 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Upendra Baxi, "The Second Gujarat Catastrophe," *Economic and Political Weekly* [epw.org.in; hereafter *EPW*], August 24, 2002. See also my own remarks on the uses and misuses of the term "governance," in Paul R. Brass, "India, Myron Weiner, and the Political Science of Development," *EPW*, July 20, 2002, pp. 3031-35

<sup>3</sup> Paul R. Brass, "The Partition of India and Retributive Genocide in the Punjab, 1946-47: Means, Methods, and Purposes," *Journal of Genocide Research*, forthcoming, 5: 1 (March, 2003).