

12-20-2019

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Recommended Citation

Verdeja, Ernesto (2019) "Critical Genocide Studies and Mass Atrocity Prevention," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 13: Iss. 3: 111-127.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.13.3.1676>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol13/iss3/10>

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Acknowledgements

A number of people have read drafts of this paper or had valuable conversations with me on this topic. My thanks to the editors of this special section, Alexander L. Hinton and Andrew Woolford, and also to Jobb Arnold, Hollie Nyseth Brehm, Daniel Feierstein, Christian Gudehus, Douglas Irvin-Erickson, George Lopez, Benjamin Meiches, Colleen Mitchell, Adam Muller, Laurie Nathan, Rashied Omar, Atalia Omer, Max Pensky, Patrick Regan, Sidney Simpson, Struan Sinclair, Guillermo Trejo, James Waller, Kerry Whigham, Veronica Zubillaga, Julia Zulver, the journal's anonymous reviewers, and participants in the Critical Genocide Prevention Workshop (U. Manitoba), the Kroc-Kellogg Peace, Conflict, Crime and Violence Workshop (U. Notre Dame), and the Political Theory Colloquium (U. Notre Dame).

Critical Genocide Studies and Mass Atrocity Prevention

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Critical genocide studies has emerged as an important strand of scholarship devoted to interrogating the core assumptions of the field of genocide studies. Drawing on the intellectual traditions of Frankfurt School critical theory as well as deconstruction, among other approaches, this scholarship has provocatively explored various methodological limitations in current research, including biases in case selection, problems with the comparative case method, definitional debates, and reductive formulations of perpetrator motivations, among other issues. Informed by critical genocide studies, this article sketches a critical approach to modern atrocity prevention.¹ Although contemporary atrocity prevention has made significant advances, I lay out several areas where a critical approach can be applied fruitfully. The paper puts forth a critical approach to prevention that is *self-reflective*, *dialectical*, *multivalent*, and *anti-teleological*.

Part I provides a brief overview of contemporary prevention theory, which I identify as rooted within a broadly liberal normative orientation. Part II elaborates the four elements of the proposed critical approach toward prevention. Part III uses the critical lens to examine several important assumptions in current atrocity prevention.

Two preliminary points of clarification follow. First, a caveat. We should not be seeking to prevent genocide *per se*, which is insufficiently wide to capture the scope of significant human rights violations that any prevention theory should encompass. Genocide prevention implies that the object of prevention is one specific kind of collective harm, the intentional destruction of groups as such, when in fact the field of critical genocide studies is concerned with a range of widespread collective violence. The focus, I contend, should be on the prevention of large-scale and severe harms against civilians. A somewhat more inclusive formulation is “atrocity crimes,” “mass atrocities,” or just “atrocities,” which include the crimes of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, as well as ethnic cleansing.

In reality, the prevention community often uses the terms genocide and atrocities interchangeably but normally means the latter.² Here, I use the term atrocities, though it makes sense to maintain the term critical genocide studies as our starting point, if only to highlight the intellectual origins of critical approaches within genocide research that seek to expand and problematize scholarly inquiry.³

Second, a point about the article’s focus: I examine atrocity prevention, which has been shaped and enriched by genocide studies scholarship but also other scholarly fields and practitioner communities. Examining only prevention in the narrower orbit of genocide studies⁴ literature misses many of these developments, and in any case atrocity prevention is now sufficiently well developed and sophisticated to warrant critical investigation on its own. In this article, prevention means those strategies, policies, and practices directed toward anticipating and arresting the onset of atrocities prior to their occurrence or reoccurrence.⁵ The appropriate range of strategies, policies

¹ In addition to various scholarly sources and government, intergovernmental organizations and NGO reports and studies noted in these footnotes, this paper is partly based on 38 semi-structured interviews with prevention practitioners for an ongoing project, “The Scholar-Practitioner Nexus in Atrocity Prevention,” which examines current challenges in prevention work and areas where scholarly research can assist the prevention community. Quotations from respondents are cited as “Nexus Project” below. I also draw on occasional work consulting with the United States government, foreign governments, and various human rights organizations.

² Ernesto Verdeja, “Predicting Genocide and Mass Atrocities,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 9, no. 3 (2016), 13-32.

³ Alexander Laban Hinton, “Critical Genocide Studies” in *Genocide Matters: Ongoing Issues and Emerging Perspectives*, eds. Joyce Apsel and Ernesto Verdeja (New York: Routledge, 2013), 42-58.

⁴ Genocide studies is a heterogeneous and interdisciplinary field, but useful critical histories are available in Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Adam Jones, ed., *New Directions in Genocide Research* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Joyce Apsel and Ernesto Verdeja, eds., *Genocide Matters: Ongoing Issues and Emerging Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2013). Also see the journals *Genocide Studies and Prevention* and *Journal of Genocide Research*.

⁵ Adam Lupel and Ernesto Verdeja, eds., “Responding to Genocide,” in *Responding to Genocide: The Politics of International Action*, eds. Adam Lupel and Ernesto Verdeja (Boulder: Lynn Rienner, 2013), 7.

and practices requires a broader historical and geographical horizon than is typically found in current atrocity prevention.

Part I

Modern atrocities prevention largely espouses a liberal normative orientation. This includes a commitment to liberal values such as human equality, freedom and democratic accountability; support for the human rights regime found in the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights and institutionalized through a rule of law system enacted by various international treaties, conventions, laws, and norms; acceptance of an international community composed of sovereign states and formalized in the UN and various regional organizations; and, a global governance architecture that curtails use of violent force through procedures for adjudicating and solving conflicts between countries. This set of claims is liberal in its emphasis on core civil and political rights and the rule of law, and insofar as it is meant to be binding on all nations. It remains the dominant orientation of prominent global human rights organizations and actors.

Contemporary atrocity prevention has evolved within this liberal orientation, becoming increasingly professionalized and sophisticated over the past two and a half decades. Although its origins can be traced at least to the end of World War II and the moral shock of the Holocaust, contemporary prevention theorizing and practice emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War and the Rwandan and Bosnian genocides. The establishment in 1994 of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, tasked with addressing “the looming threats to world peace of intergroup violence” and developing “new ideas for the prevention and resolution of deadly conflict,” helped center attention on the protection of civilians in a new way.⁶ In 2001 the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty released its report, *The Responsibility to Protect*, as an answer to Secretary General Kofi Annan’s call to renew UN efforts to stop mass atrocities. That report reformulated the relationship between national sovereignty and human rights through the responsibility to protect (R2P) norm, and provided a rearticulation of the legal, political and moral justifications for more robust prevention and intervention strategies. The UN General Assembly’s subsequent endorsement of a revised version of R2P has entrenched the norm, if imperfectly, in international politics.⁷ Additionally, the establishment in 2004 and subsequent expansion of the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect has helped secure the place of atrocity prevention in the highest reaches of the human rights firmament.

Contemporary international atrocity prevention now benefits from a confluence of factors: the marked expansion of the UN’s peacebuilding portfolio; the spread of human rights in global political discourse; the development of advanced graduate programs in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, humanitarianism and related fields; a professionalized international human rights community; private and foundation funding sources for prevention; and, a rise in the number of foreign ministries in the global north that advocate human rights in their work. Current prevention work consists of extensive cross-fertilization between scholarship and practice, and a substantial amount of research is driven by concrete policy questions or challenges.⁸ Much of this is characterized by policy work that emphasizes not only conflict termination and resolution but also the promotion of individual human rights, the rule of law, liberal democracy, and a market economy.

The Atrocity Prevention Lens

As the Budapest Centre for Mass Atrocities Prevention has noted, there at least four reasons for adopting an atrocity prevention lens as distinct from conflict prevention, the latter of which

⁶ Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, *Preventing Deadly Conflict Final Report* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1997), 9.

⁷ International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: ICISS, 2001); United Nations General Assembly, *2005 World Summit Outcome*, A/RES/60/1 (October 24, 2005), para. 138-140.

⁸ Craig Zelizer, ed., *Integrated Peacebuilding: Innovative Approaches to Transforming Conflict* (Boulder: Westview, 2013).

largely addresses violent conflict between armed actors.⁹ First, mass atrocities may occur outside of regular armed conflict or continue once a ceasefire has been concluded.¹⁰ Although atrocities outside of armed violence comprise a minority of situations, they are still sufficiently common to warrant the development of atrocity prevention strategies distinct from traditional conflict resolution. Second, mass atrocities are by definition crimes, and thus always illegal. The same normative condemnation does not hold for all conflicts, where the legality of the use of violent force is sanctioned and controlled (in principle, if not in practice) by international law. Third, prevention does not stop when the killings start, even if the scope of action is severely limited; there may be opportunities to reduce civilian suffering and provide assistance, even if armed conflict is ongoing. Fourth, preventing atrocities entails developing forecasting tools and violence escalation models that do not necessarily track directly with forecasting armed conflict. Governments may repress civilian populations without facing any armed resistance, and thus mainstream conflict prevention theories are not easily applicable.¹¹

Given these justifications for a focus on atrocities as distinct from armed conflict, what are the primary elements of modern liberal atrocity prevention? Although specific terminology and conceptualization may differ, contemporary atrocity prevention has settled on a relatively stable set of practices.¹² Current prevention is typically divided into two general areas, structural and operational.¹³ The former focuses on the long-term prevention of harms, such as by conducting risk assessments, promoting liberal democracy, addressing profound economic and political inequalities, fostering the rule of law, encouraging integration into the global capitalist economy, and supporting human welfare and development, among other strategies. Operational prevention concerns situations where atrocities are occurring or likely to do so. Strategies may include early warning monitoring, diplomatic pressure on leaders, peace negotiations, economic sanctions, humanitarian assistance for vulnerable populations, and at its extreme, military intervention.¹⁴ A third area concerns preventing the recurrence of atrocities, and it is largely the purview of transitional justice, political reconciliation, and long-term societal peacebuilding. Within each area,

⁹ Conflict prevention includes a broad range of incentives and threats, such as trade and economic enticements, political recognition, economic sanctions, military coercion, and threats of legal prosecution, to get parties to the negotiating table and agree to stop fighting. A common formulation of armed conflict in this work posits a bell-shaped cycle with distinct stages. Although the details differ across cases, the basic stages are well established: absence of conflict; latency; emergence; escalation; stalemate; de-escalation; resolution; and, peacebuilding. The conflict cycle model has the benefit of parsimony and clarity, and because of this it has proven remarkably durable. It has been employed extensively to make sense of myriad post-World War II conflicts through the present with the aim of identifying the various points where de-escalation and even conflict resolution may be possible. I. William Zartman and Alvaro de Soto, *Timing Mediation Initiatives* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2010); Louis Kriesberg and Bruce Dayton, *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

¹⁰ Alex Bellamy, "Mass Atrocities and Armed Conflict: Links, Distinctions, and Implications for the Responsibility to Prevent" (Muscataine: The Stanley Foundation, 2011).

¹¹ Budapest Centre, "What is Mass Atrocities Prevention?", n.d., accessed October 24, 2018, <http://www.genocideprevention.eu/what-is-mass-atrocities-prevention/>.

¹² For an overview, see James Waller, *Confronting Evil: Engaging Our Responsibility to Prevent Genocide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Madeline K. Albright and William S. Cohen, *Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers* (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2008); Sabrina Stein, *Atrocity Prevention in A Nutshell: Origins, Concepts and Approaches* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2016); United States Agency for International Development, *Field Guide: Helping Prevent Mass Atrocities* (Washington, DC: United States Agency for International Development, 2015); United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, *Framework for Analysis of Atrocity Crimes* (New York: United Nations, 2014); Alex Bellamy, *Mass Atrocity and Armed Conflict*; Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016); European Union Policy and Planning Unit, *The Early Warning and Conflict Prevention Capability of the Council of the European Union*, (Initiative for Peacebuilding, March 2010), accessed October 13, 2018, <http://www.ifp-ew.eu/pdf/0611prelisbon.pdf>; Helen Fein, *Human Rights and Wrongs* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007).

¹³ Some scholars also identify a distinct domain of *systemic* prevention, concerned with transnational factors of violence, though in practice this is largely focused on terrorism, arms sales, and international crime. See Adam Lupel and Ernesto Verdeja, *Responding to Genocide*, 7.

¹⁴ James Waller refers to upstream and midstream prevention strategies to capture this distinction, with downstream referring to "post" violence situations. Waller, *Confronting Evil*, 135-210.

the set of available strategies may be more or less coercive to incentivize changes in behavior, and not all strategies will be employed. Over twenty years of research and practice have helped hone and fine-tune them, and the available mix illustrates the development and maturation of prevention thinking.¹⁵

We now have better understandings of the short and midterm drivers of violence, greater knowledge of the primary indicators of onset, and awareness of the importance of supporting “upstream” prevention efforts.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the dominant atrocity prevention lens contains a number of limitations which have practical consequences. These limitations require critical scrutiny, and include: the displacement of global and regional contextualization in favor of the nation-state as the object of analysis and treatment; the overlap between prevention and securitization; limited conceptualizations of violence; the emphasis on expert knowledge above concrete, embedded, localized and historical knowledge; and, highly selective engagement with civil society and local actors. I explore each of these clusters of limitations in more detail below. First, however, I sketch a critical approach to prevention, which helps provide the conceptual framework for the subsequent discussion.

Part II

The critical approach presented in this section is meant as a perspective by which to assess current atrocity prevention thinking and strategies. Although there are many valuable points in current atrocity prevention work, adopting a critical perspective highlights certain lacuna as well as ways forward.

The points I make below are *critical* in two ways: first, in the narrow sense that they are informed by the work of the intellectual tradition of Critical Theory and the scholars of the Frankfurt School. Although these thinkers did not write extensively on international politics, their commitment to emancipatory, historically grounded social theory that is firmly rooted in empirical research provides an important analytical orientation for prevention. They distinguished themselves from approaches based on abstract moral philosophy (which tends to posit ahistorical, universal values, such as “natural rights”), as well as reductive social scientific methods that treat empirical facts as “given” while ignoring interpretive questions or the particular perspectival limitations and biases of the observer. A foundational text remains Max Horkheimer’s 1937 essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” which lays out three important markers of this approach.¹⁷ For Horkheimer, a critical theory is normatively committed to human emancipation, and thus rejects as untenable the fact-value distinctions dominant in the social sciences; it adopts a wide range of social scientific methods combined with philosophical critique (in other words, it is rooted in social theory, not idealist philosophy); and, it is tasked with showing how transformational change can occur. It is therefore not merely aspirational, as is common in some leftist utopian political thought. Indeed, genocide scholars have already adopted such a critical perspective in their work.¹⁸

The points below are *critical* in a second, wider sense: they amount to a perspective that is explicitly normative, dialectical, and attuned to how power relations shape social analysis and practice while also hiding their contradictions and tensions.¹⁹

In line with these general claims, I propose a critical genocide studies approach to prevention that is *self-reflective, dialectical, multivalent, and anti-teleological*. Below I present what this means.

¹⁵ Sheri P. Rosenberg, et al., eds., *Reconstructing Atrocity Prevention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ An excellent discussion of these various strategies is found in James Waller, *Confronting Evil*.

¹⁷ Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, eds. Max Horkheimer and Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1995), 188-243.

¹⁸ Mathias Thaler, *Naming Violence: A Critical Theory of Genocide, Torture and Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); A. Dirk Moses, “Toward a Critical Theory of Genocide Studies,” *Mass Violence and Resistance – Research Network*, April 18, 2008, accessed August 1, 2018, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/toward-theory-critical-genocide-studies>.

¹⁹ I draw on the Frankfurt School’s social theory because it makes these points sharply. However, my general points are broadly compatible with a host of other critical theories that share many of the same attributes. See Razmig Keucheyan, *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today* (London: Verso, 2013).

Self-reflective: Self-reflectivity involves adopting a theoretical stance where the researcher remains aware, and interrogates, her own positionality. This means several things. First, and rather obviously, this entails recognizing that there is no value-neutral analytical position, say for assessing the causes of violence or the means of prevention. In other words, it rejects an unexamined neutrality still dominant in many areas of the social sciences. As a first step it means examining how the methods one employs – whether qualitative, quantitative, interpretive or various mixed approaches – and their various assumptions shape the perception of a research question, design and execution. Of course, neutrality of that kind is hardly the problem for liberal prevention scholars or practitioners – they do not hesitate in condemning *genocidaires* and war criminals, and are instead quite explicit about their normative commitments. But self-reflectivity is important in a second sense: it consists of questioning the prima facie authority of the human rights expert (scholar, diplomat, activist, etc.) who may make a claim to grasp the problem of violence and the appropriate response (e.g., by providing the “theory” of genocide, the “theory” of prevention), and who is thus authorized to determine what a society in crisis needs. To be self-reflective is to confront how any analysis of violence, and the prevention plan that follows, always includes a set of normative claims and assumptions that cannot be theorized away or held at bay. Given these constitutive biases in interpretation, the researcher should be committed to critiquing both the presuppositions of theories as well as the status of the expert speaker – and this holds for critiquing one’s own positionality as expert in addressing these issues. This does not mean a rejection tout court of expertise or accumulated knowledge based on sound research – far from it. Rather, a critical, self-reflective perspective invites cultivating *epistemic humility*: if we remain wary of comprehensive, ‘scientific’ understandings of violence, and thus the seduction of speaking for all, we are enjoined to take much more seriously the claims, knowledge and authority – the practical agency – of local prevention actors. Self-reflection demands an openness to those claims, and thus authority, of multiple agents, as well as engagement with the disruptions and uncomfortable truths that this may entail.²⁰

Dialectical: This involves several components. First, the prioritization of *relational analyses of concepts and phenomena*, rather than treating them in isolation of one another. A dialectical approach posits that concepts are defined and shaped in relation to one another, and thus it is these relations, and subsequent changes to relations, that require special attention. A dialectical approach, in other words, historicizes concept formation and theoretical claims. Thus, it is skeptical toward the reductive reification of concepts as 1) comprehensive explanatory factors (e.g., ethnic war, ideology, etc.), 2) identity categories (e.g., Hutu v. Tutsi, moderate Hutu, spoilers, bystanders, etc.), and 3) outcomes (e.g., successful prevention, stability, reintegration, peace, reconciliation, etc.). Naturally, any social theory of change, including one about violence and peace, must employ concepts to understand otherwise highly complex and oftentimes confusing social and political processes. Concepts allow us to make sense of complicated dynamics and shifting contexts and they structure our analyses. However, a tendency toward conceptual reification in prevention work risks producing analyses that posit as true what in fact are parsimonious proxies for reality.

A dialectical approach also helps *highlight hidden tensions and exclusions* in analysis and practice. It can challenge, for example, otherwise sharp, categorical distinctions between “political” violence and common crime, and help us understand how violence can be displaced from one social domain to another, such as how previously political violence may become routinized quotidian violence after a peace accord is signed and security personnel join criminal enterprises.²¹ We miss these displacements if we only employ discrete analytical categories of violence and fail to assess their dialectical relationships to each other.

Multivalent: A critical prevention approach is multivalent. It resists efforts to maintain prevention to one level of analysis, be it the so-called “international community,” national elites, or domestic governance institutions, and instead it takes as its starting point the interconnection

²⁰ James DeShaw Rae, *Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice in East Timor* (Boulder: First Forum Press, 2009).

²¹ Victoria Sanford and Martha Lincoln, “Body of Evidence: Femicide, Local Justice, and Rule of Law in ‘Peacetime’ Guatemala,” in *Transitional Justice: Global Mechanisms and Local Realities After Genocide and Mass Violence*, ed. Alexander Laban Hinton (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 67-94.

of multiple analytical levels: global, regional, national and subnational. Framed this way, we can examine a host of questions important to prevention: How are violence dynamics at different levels linked theoretically and empirically? Under what conditions are national or subnational conflict dynamics exacerbated by broader global and regional structural factors, reinforce one another, or follow some other interactive pattern? To what extent, and how, do shifts in global structures of power and “different world-historical contexts produce different patterns or extents of genocide”?²² By identifying such linkages and causal processes, we may be able to locate new prevention actors, tools and strategies.

Anti-teleological: Lastly, a critical approach does not assume a certain patterned unfolding or endpoint of social processes. Critical genocide studies scholars have rightly critiqued the dominant modernization theories that equate societal advancement with the spread of liberal democracy, free markets and Enlightenment values, for downplaying histories of genocide and slavery on which Western progress was built - what Hegel called the slaughter bench of history.²³ The conceit of developing sophisticated and teleological theories of historical change is occasionally reproduced in prevention work at smaller scales, where paradigmatic “conflict cycle” models lay out the natural ebbs and flows of collective violence. This does not hold, for example, for the genocidal violence against indigenous peoples in colonial settler democracies, nor does it obtain in many other cases around the world, such as in parts of sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East. A critical approach remains skeptical of generalized teleological claims that rest on selective empirical observation, such as claims that violent conflicts have built-in cycles of escalation and de-escalation²⁴ or that political reconciliation is achievable through the application of certain sequential strategies. It is equally skeptical of the existence and application of universal ‘lessons learned’ that can be taken from one context and applied, with minimal alteration, to substantially different contexts, or even in the same location but over different historical periods.

A common thread throughout this discussion is the foregrounding of how values, power, and knowledge are intimately linked. Values such as peace, justice and human rights are always constituted by power relations, and are at least partly given legitimacy through the knowledge claims of actors holding a certain status in an epistemic community, such as scholars, government leaders, and expert practitioners from the global north. Ultimately, a critical approach is oriented toward interrogating and deconstructing these complex connections between values, power and knowledge.

Part III

Given the four elements presented above, several critical tasks for prevention follow. This section identifies a few issue areas that are central to a critical genocide studies approach to prevention. This list is not meant to be exhaustive. In some cases, a critical approach encourages a shift in our analytical perspective to focus on the ways in which several dominant assumptions hide important global power relations and trends that can exacerbate violence. In other cases, the points below concern deepening or extending claims that are already found in dominant prevention work – such as privileging the importance of civil society actors – but doing so in ways that may have transformative effects. If we continue to use the language of a prevention lens, we are asking, what is in focus, and what remains blurred?

²² Shaw, *Genocide and International Relations*, 8.

²³ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Part III, sec. 24. For the general critique see Andrew Woolford, *This Benevolent Experiment: Indigenous Boarding Schools, Genocide and Redress in Canada and the United States* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018); Louise Wise, “Three Colonialisms, the Developmental State, and the Global-Systemic Constitution of Genocide in Sudan,” *International Political Sociology* (forthcoming); Daniel Feierstein, *El Genocidio como Práctica Social: Entre el Nazismo y la Experiencia Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica de Argentina, 2011); Christopher Powell, *Barbaric Civilization: A Critical Sociology of Genocide* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 2011); Damien Short, *Redefining Genocide: Settler Colonialism, Social Death and Ecocide* (London: Zed Books, 2016); Mark Levene, *The Crisis of Genocide*, Volumes I and II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁴ Zartman and de Soto, *Timing Mediation Initiatives*; Kriesberg and Dayton, *Constructive Conflicts*. For alternatives, see Robert Ricigliano, *Making Peace Last* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

Global and Regional Contextualization

Prevention must extend its use of global and regional analyses. Shaw underscores the importance of “complex structural analysis of the local and regional contexts of genocidal violence together with their insertion into global power relations”²⁵ as a key starting point of prevention thinking. He has convincingly argued that the sites of genocidal violence have moved across regions of the world according to historical shifts in global power arrangements caused by colonialism, the collapse of empires, and the Cold War.²⁶ Prevention today requires greater focus on, and mitigation of, these large processes of violence displacement by developing and enhancing tools that limit the military, political and economic overreach of powerful countries. The tendency in prevention practice of treating countries as discrete, isolated cases risks reproducing a focus on the (very real and violent) symptoms of regional stresses, fragility and collapse at the expense of examining their larger structural causes and enablers. This does not mean focusing exclusively on global factors. Instead, it requires examining systematically the ways in which these factors overwhelm regional, national and local sources of resilience. Two points follow for prevention purposes:

First, explore how contemporary global political dynamics structure and drive regional and local violence, including the roles of “wars against terrorism,” struggles among powerful states and alliances over spheres of influence across Asia, Europe, Latin America, north Africa and the Middle East, and global economic and environmental/climactic pressures that weaken already fragile states in the global south.

Ameliorative prevention programs typical of the liberal approach seek to contain national outbreaks of genocide or mass killings, but often only superficially acknowledge and then ‘bracket out’ how regional and global power politics can cause or exacerbate localized violence. Instead, the critique of global power politics should be at the center of atrocity prevention. Atrocity prevention should directly challenge, for instance, US, Russian, and Chinese foreign policies that serve as drivers of political violence in different regions, as well as interrogate how the United Nations and regional governance organizations may legitimize the interests of powerful states in a gambit to secure their short-term support. Prevention also requires more attention to problems of uneven global economic integration that can weaken domestic institutions, and how environmental destabilization can exacerbate local sources of violent conflict where governance institutions remain weak. At its core, this involves critiquing, and reimagining, what is meant by that empty signifier, “international community,” that occasionally functions to legitimize violence and the unequal distribution of global power. As one Nigerian civil society activist pointed out,

The Europeans, and especially the Americans, talk about the terrible violence of African [jihadi] groups, but don’t ask, ‘how did our own actions in Libya worsen these problems? How are our own counterterrorism programs across the region encouraging state repression and harming civil society?’ You can’t really bring this up. They acknowledge it, say yes, yes, and then move on and talk about problems in your own country and what you should do about it.²⁷

Second, more attention is needed on how, and under what conditions, violence crosses national borders. Atrocities are not kept within neat political boundaries. Violence often follows a contagion effect, spreading to neighboring areas and destabilizing them. The practitioner community is well aware of this, of course, but cross-national analyses often still privilege one country and involve assessments of international and transnational dynamics to the extent that those dynamics affect the primary country. Further research is required for understanding how these violence dynamics influence one another, and thus what additional prevention strategies are necessary but may be ignored. Greater attention to regions of violence, and not only country cases, can aid this. Some of this is already happening: The United States Institute of Peace’s project examining Africa’s Lake

²⁵ Martin Shaw, “The Concept of Genocide: What Are We Preventing?,” in *Genocide, Risk and Resilience: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, eds., Bert Ingelaere, et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 31.

²⁶ Martin Shaw, *Genocide and International Relations: Changing Patterns in the Transitions of the Late Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²⁷ Respondent 30, Nexus Project.

Chad region - rather than Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon individually or dyadically – is providing greater insights into how different vectors of violence require different strategies for prevention and peacebuilding,²⁸ while new research projects analyzing violence in the African Great Lakes region have helped develop cross-border monitoring and prevention.²⁹ Nevertheless, these types of studies remain in the minority, thus reinforcing the tendency to see country cases as the default level of analysis.

Securitization

Atrocity response is shaped by state interests. Political leaders frequently adopt a national security litmus test to assess the feasibility, and thus value, of prevention in terms of whether it advances certain core national interests – wealth, power, credibility, and ultimately security – rather than in terms of some moral compunction to reduce human suffering elsewhere. This approach, of course, is still with us today: the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) periodic “Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community” is one of the most succinct formulations of prevention available from a national security perspective. A public summary of the findings of seventeen intelligence agencies, the 2018 report for instance states that its charge is to provide intelligence needed to “protect American lives and America’s interests anywhere in the world.”³⁰ It is in this context that “violent – even regime threatening – instability and mass atrocities” are presented as a danger to core US interests, and thus any prevention work should be carried out with the aim of advancing, or at least protecting, those interests.³¹

The national security approach has always been explicit in tying the reduction of human suffering abroad to promoting core national interests.³² What requires greater parsing is how since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the liberal approach to atrocity prevention has become somewhat bifurcated, with one strand becoming heavily influenced by security discourse, motivations and objectives. A substantial number of intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) still engage in practical and policy-focused atrocity prevention rooted in liberal norms, but prevention has also been at least partly redefined and instrumentalized elsewhere as an aspect of national security. Securitization is especially evident in peacebuilding discussions about the Middle East and North Africa, where the “resurgence of the state-centric security agenda” has “appropriated peacebuilding,”³³ including prevention, though it is not limited only to this region. The result is a narrowing of what qualifies as peacebuilding, and its conflation with political stabilization and conflict management.³⁴ The tensions between these two strands of liberal prevention efforts show no signs of abating.³⁵

An example of this narrowing between security and liberal arguments is found in an influential genocide prevention report from the Obama era. After noting how genocide is “horrific” and a “direct assault on universal human values,” Madeline Albright and William Cohen’s *Preventing*

²⁸ See USIP, “Resolve Network,” accessed July 20, 2018, <https://resolvenet.org/projects/lake-chad-basin>.

²⁹ See, for instance, the work of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, “Home Page,” accessed July 20, 2018, <http://www.icglr.org/index.php/en/>

³⁰ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community” (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2018), 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

³² Fabian Klose, ed., *The Emergence of Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas and Practice from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Business* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Rajan Menon, *The Conceit of Humanitarian Intervention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³³ Necla Tschirgi, “Securitization and Peacebuilding,” in *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding*, ed., Roger MacGinty (New York: Routledge, 2013), 208.

³⁴ Edward Newman, “Peacebuilding as Security in Failing and Conflict Prone States,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 4, no. 3 (2010), 305-322.

³⁵ This is particularly evident in debates over the responsibility to protect norm. The Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, which includes over eighty member NGOs, is often involved in debates over the securitization of peace and human rights while defending a robust understanding of R2P. See responsibilitytoprotect.org and also, passim, reports on R2P from the International Peace Institute, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, International Center for Transitional Justice, Human Rights First, and other major NGOs in the Washington D.C. – New York orbit. Also see Lupel and Verdeja, *Responding to Genocide*.

Genocide states categorically that, “[g]enocide and mass atrocities also threaten core US national interests.” They go on:

[Genocide and mass atrocities] feed on and fuel other threats in weak and corrupt states, with dangerous spillover effects that know no boundaries. If the United States does not engage in preventing these crimes, we inevitably bear greater costs – in feeding millions of refugees and trying to manage long lasting crises. In addition, US credibility and leadership are compromised when we fail to work with international partners to prevent genocide and mass atrocities.³⁶

Preventing Genocide justifies prevention (and intervention) on both humanitarian and national security grounds. The more recent disturbing trend in some democracies, including in the United States, toward authoritarian populism and xenophobic, racist politics has shifted prevention justifications further away from humanitarianism toward national security and counter-terrorism.³⁷ A task of critical prevention work is to interrogate this discursive displacement, which equates securitization and peacebuilding (including prevention), and examine in detail its practical consequences. For instance, what are the specific security imperatives that frame powerful states’ selection of atrocity cases and prevention interests? What are the functional consequences of these choices – that is to say, which cases are left out, and why? How are liberal norms and discourse appropriated to advance security interests and neutralize radical critiques of state power?

There are also a set of subnational institutional questions around securitization. Governments are not monolithic, and various government agencies may be at odds with one another in approaching prevention and human rights advocacy.³⁸ One conflict analyst in the US government remarked,

The people in State [Department], CIA and Defense [Department], to take just a few examples, have somewhat different understandings of threats, and thus different priorities. The CIA and Defense have comparatively narrow understandings of US foreign policy objectives. State works much more closely with foreign civil society organizations and the UN, but this puts them in occasional tension with others in our own government. And, the instructions mid-level State folks receive from the top often conflict with their own best judgment, especially these days... So, there can be a lot of turf wars, but that also means that there’s a lot of different opinions on what national security means and the relative weight that should be given to human rights abroad. There isn’t just one perspective that everyone has.³⁹

Given these internal differences, a number of questions follow: how do various government agencies understand their prevention portfolios? Who resolves disagreements between competing prevention priorities, and using what criteria? What are the formal and informal bureaucratic mechanisms for resolving disputes, and what is kept and what is lost? How can human rights protection norms be insulated from problematic securitization pressures in policy formulation and execution?

Broaden the Scope of Violence

Mass killings and fleeing civilians still drive high-level political attention and thus international prevention priorities. This short-term, reactive approach is certainly a result of media framing, popular pressure, and the limited attention of decision-makers, but it is not only this; there is

³⁶ Albright and Cohen, *Preventing Genocide*, xv.

³⁷ An example is how the US government has changed the substance of programs around “countering violent extremism,” a term that under the administration of Barack Obama referred to a wide set of potential threats, whether left or right, secular or religious. In the Donald Trump administration, it now focuses on Islamic terrorism; analysis of rightwing terrorism and racism, including within the United States, has largely been relegated to the background. Respondent 2, Nexus Project.

³⁸ See the special issue on national mechanisms for atrocity prevention, James P. Finkel, ed., “Global Approaches to Atrocity Prevention: Theory, Practice, and the State of the Field,” special issue, *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 11, no. 3 (2018).

³⁹ Respondent 13, Nexus Project.

also a deeper theoretical myopia that contributes directly to this problem. Adopting a dialectical sensitivity to our fundamental concepts encourages us to interrogate dominant formulations of atrocities and expand the types of harms requiring attention from the prevention community.⁴⁰

One consequence of a dialectical approach is greater scrutiny of dominant theoretical formulations of core concepts and their problematic practical consequences. Benjamin Meiches, for example, has persuasively critiqued the “hegemonic” understanding of genocide – which emphasizes mass killings above other forms of violence, relatively static collective identity categories, and an excessively narrow understanding of intentionality – for foreclosing discussions about what types of violence demand condemnation and what groups of people deserve protection. For him, the hegemonic understanding “is thus the effort to *normalize* and *depoliticize* destructive processes that do not fit with dominant perceptions about identity, violence, and history.”⁴¹ In essence, the danger is that prominent formulations of our basic concepts (such as genocide) may in turn minimize the importance of other forms of violence.

For instance, current atrocity prevention work pays little attention to structural violence, those deeply entrenched and systemic harms against vulnerable populations that are reproduced over time. This kind of violence is structural because it is woven into a society’s economic, political and social relations, reaffirmed through formal policies and informal practices, and legitimized by the norms and values of the broader culture. Structural violence normally appears as a form of social anomie, where groups live precarious lives marked by high rates of poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, poor mental health, displacement, emotional and physical insecurity, high mortality rates, and weakened social bonds.⁴² It is routinized and thus naturalized – treated as a part of the given, if lamentable, state of affairs – making it difficult to pinpoint a specific set of responsible agents, even if its consequences are dire and even genocidal.⁴³ One human rights analyst in the European Union noted,

Look, we [prevention practitioners] all know that there are a number of long-term, structural causes to mass atrocities, but in fact we largely focus on actual outbreaks of violence – the killings, ethnic cleansing, torture, and the like. It is hard to tie in questions of poverty and long-term discrimination into prevention, except in the most general ways... We don’t have the resources to do so, but we also frankly don’t always prioritize it. Think of how at the [UN] Security Council they really started talking about the Rohingya once the killings and forced displacements got worse.⁴⁴

And yet it is also precisely its routinization that makes it invisible, except for occasional, episodic moments when the state employs more explicit violence – killings, torture, disappearances – to reinforce structures of exclusion and marginalization. Structural violence often occurs over a much longer time period. This is most apparent in the treatment of indigenous populations in settler societies, where the process of genocidal attrition occurs over a period spanning decades or centuries and in some instances continues to this day.⁴⁵ Crucially, structural violence can also result in more recent instances of genocide, insofar as the basic conditions of social life are destroyed over time and the collective identity of the group disappears.

A critical approach, then, requires examining how our dominant concepts of violence systematically erase certain kinds of harms and experiences, and it also necessitates foregrounding

⁴⁰ Laura Collins, “Rethinking Genocide, Mass Atrocities and Political Violence in Africa,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 13, no. 4 (2019), 2-13.

⁴¹ Benjamin Meiches, *The Politics of Annihilation: A Genealogy of Genocide* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 13.

⁴² Paul Farmer, “An Anthropology of Structural Violence,” *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 3 (2004), 305-325; Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6 no. 3 (1969), 167-191.

⁴³ Sheri Rosenberg and Everita Silina, “Genocide by Attrition: Silent but Effective,” in *Genocide Matters: Ongoing Issues and Emerging Perspectives*, eds., Joyce Apsel and Ernesto Verdeja (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁴⁴ Respondent 17, Nexus Project.

⁴⁵ Woolford, *This Benevolent Experiment*; Powell, *Barbaric Civilization*.

severe structural violence. It means prioritizing the structural prevention dimension of current practice by devoting greater attention to how systemic and long-term processes of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness and cultural imperialism, to use Iris Marion Young's terms,⁴⁶ are linked to the various forms of direct violence that dominate the attention of the prevention community. It also means moving beyond thinking of these harms merely as precursors to atrocities and instead seeing them as significant on their own, requiring immediate attention.

Expert opinions, epistemic orthodoxies

Contemporary prevention places a high premium on expert knowledge and technical mastery. The depth of expertise is indeed substantial, and as discussed earlier, now consists of sophisticated bodies of knowledge. But the accumulation of this knowledge has come with certain challenges. The prevention community's professionalization and, at its most influential levels in the global north, separation from or selective engagement with local and regional practitioners around the world, has reinforced an epistemological orthodoxy that occasionally privileges "lessons learned" approaches, understood as generalized tools from a kit of classifications, procedures and strategies that can be applied to widely disparate contexts. These lessons learned in turn generate a fair amount of uniformity in recommended policy solutions and delivery systems.⁴⁷

Professionalism has also led to the creation of a class of prevention practitioners who have a great deal of practical mastery of generic prevention tools. This reinforces the general discounting of local knowledge and actors in conflict zones in favor of applying general lessons learned from other contexts. The result is the production of expert epistemic communities that remain rarefied and isolated from local peacebuilders and prevention practitioners. In its more extreme variants, it produces a disturbing cycle: problems are identified in the global south, they are analyzed, diagnosed and codified as new doxa in the global north, and finally, experts from the north recommend treatments to be applied on the south.

The lessons learned problem is not only about types of knowledge, but also tensions generated in the field. In writing about peacebuilding more generally, Severine Autesserre refers to a "bubble," or isolated world of practitioners in conflict zones, as "peaceland," a place with its "own time, space and economics," where "expatriates' social habits, standard security procedures, and habitual approaches to collecting information in violence... strongly impact the effectiveness of intervention efforts."⁴⁸ As one Sierra Leonean peace activist told me,

The experts who come from New York and Europe often have little understanding of the local conflicts here. They don't go into the villages, don't travel around the country, don't speak any of the local languages. But they know what the problem is and how to fix it, because maybe they spent time in East Timor, or Guatemala, or maybe Rwanda. They talk to one another and then they leave, and don't return until there is another crisis.⁴⁹

Too strong a focus on technical mastery, unreflective application of lessons from other contexts, and little time in the field minimize reliance on contextual knowledge and local peace builders, with detrimental results.

It is important to be clear here: the problem is not expert knowledge or the generation and use of guidelines and lessons, *as such*. Nor is this a criticism of particular research methods. Our understandings of how to improve prevention efforts should be based on rigorous research using a

⁴⁶ Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ Josaphat Musamba Bussy and Carol Jean Gallo, "The Great Lakes Region of Africa: Local Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding from the Democratic Republic of Congo," in *The Palgrave Handbook on Disciplinary and Regional Approaches to Peace*, eds. Oliver Richmond, et al (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 312-324; Pamina Firchow *Reclaiming Everyday Peace: Local Voices in Measurement and Evaluation After War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁴⁸ Severine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 5, 9.

⁴⁹ Respondent 24, Nexus Project.

broad range of social scientific methods, including qualitative, quantitative and interpretive. These types of research must be informed – and in turn shaped – by practical findings in the field. The problem, rather, develops when certain bodies of knowledge becomes a new orthodoxy, reinforced by the creation of largely closed communities of experts, and remain insulated from critique, contestation, refinement and even transformation from local expertise and practice.

Civil Society

A critical approach underscores the importance of civil society as a crucial space for advancing prevention. The term has a long and complex history, but for our purposes civil society refers to a space of social relations “autonomous from the state where groups and movements create new alliances, further their interests and views, and engage with one another to shape public and elite opinion with the aim of influencing state policy and public discourse.”⁵⁰ It is the social space, in other words, where the articulation of inclusive, nonviolent values can be advanced, and it is composed of a wide range of groups.⁵¹ Obviously, not all civil society groups or movements support inclusivity or human rights. The term “civil society” is analytical, not explicitly normative, as groups may spearhead persecution and otherwise legitimize violence. Myanmar’s Ma Ba Tha Buddhist extremist organization has encouraged terrorizing Rohingya civilians, a sobering example of the dangerous side of civil society.⁵² This phenomenon of violent civil society groups is well known, and has rightly received plenty of attention from prevention practitioners.

A more systemic problem, however, is the split in the prevention community between, on the one hand, influential international actors who have limited and selective engagement with local civil society groups, and on the other, smaller prevention groups that may have stronger connections to local peacebuilders but lack the ability to influence high-level prevention policy. Too often, international actors give domestic civil society groups only pro-forma support, with insufficient engagement with groups as partners and *leaders* in prevention. Only a small fraction of local civil society organizations may succeed in establishing linkages with powerful foreign prevention actors, whether donors, intergovernmental organizations, the UN, other states, or prominent NGOs. The most successful civil society groups in the global south have comparatively more social capital: they have members who speak English or French, can navigate the cultural norms of Westerners, and are capable of formulating their own goals and needs in terms of the criteria and expectations provided by Western donors, governments and aid agencies. A multivalent approach, however, encourages greater effort to bring in more activist and local civil society and social movement organizations into prevention, both in terms of assisting them with resources and training, and also in enabling them to lead efforts according to their own set of priorities and understandings of local conflict dynamics.⁵³ Without this, the doxa of the expert risks being reproduced uncritically. A civil society activist from eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo said,

Groups like ours, which are small and organic [from the community], do a great deal of peace work on the ground, including around public health, support for women and girls, and conflict resolution. We also have informal connections to other organizations around the [provinces of the] Kivus and even in neighboring countries. There are many alliances like this, but we remain invisible to the UN and big donors because we are seen as too small and we have difficulty getting their attention. Also, sometimes we are most critical of the

⁵⁰ Ernesto Verdeja, *Unchopping A Tree: Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Political Violence* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 138.

⁵¹ For instance, it may include community and traditional groups, faith-based organizations, various professional organizations, human rights advocacy groups, and informal networks and social movements, among others.

⁵² Fergal Keane, “Rohingya Crisis: Meeting Myanmar’s Hardline Buddhist Monks,” *BBC News*, September 14, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41263073>.

⁵³ See, for instance, the work of the Sentinel Project for Genocide Prevention, “Home Page,” accessed June 23, 2018, <http://thesentinelproject.org>, the Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, “Home Page,” accessed June 23, 2018, <http://www.auschwitzinstitute.org> and *Interpeace*, “Home Page,” accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.interpeace.org/>, among others.

government security forces, and this can cause problems for outsiders who see Kinshasa as a partner.⁵⁴

Civil society groups can be important sources of prevention and restraint in a variety of ways, and the prevention community needs to cultivate and encourage this more extensively. Their contributions are varied, and may include protecting vulnerable populations, monitoring and reporting abuses, advocating human rights, nondiscrimination and peaceful coexistence in ways that are culturally rooted and resonant beyond formal legal norms or government policies, creating solidarity movements by building and extending networks of like-minded organizations, and, pressuring political leaders to change policies.⁵⁵ More contentiously, some groups may advance peacebuilding by openly critiquing and resisting narratives that emphasize difference and dehumanization of vulnerable populations, identifying and condemning discriminatory practices by the government or others, shaming perpetrators and supporters of violence, and pressuring bystanders to be actively engaged in defending rights.

This list of contributions is well supported by empirical research.⁵⁶ However, it still falls largely within a liberal paradigm typical of mainstream prevention work, anchored in standard political and civil rights and secured by advancing values such as tolerance and respect for the rule of law. All of this, of course, is important. But a critical perspective significantly expands the role for civil society. Civil society groups are well positioned, for instance, to engage in much more uncomfortable, but often necessary, public debate examining how a country's founding principles of self-rule and governance, as well as its origin myths and 'settled' histories, may be implicated in the sustained exclusion and oppression of minority groups from the past through the present. This can entail contesting dominant understandings of collective identity in deeply divided societies, challenging conceptions of political reconciliation that reproduce the values and self-understandings of majority groups, and opening a space for reimagining what a just shared future may look like. For instance, in indigenous communities in settler colonial democracies like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, contesting the very terms of national membership – who are 'we, the people' – raises profound issue about the limitations of modern configurations of sovereignty. To mark collective identity and the terms of reconciliation as politically off limits because of its possible disruptions risks perpetuating the symbolic violence and erasure that is a constitutive part of collective harms.⁵⁷

A critical approach to civil society underscores the need to include radical peaceful social movements that often remain marginalized, resisted or otherwise ignored by mainstream prevention actors because of what they have to say and how they say it.⁵⁸ Such an engagement goes well beyond short- and mid-term causes of atrocities and draws attention to the narratives and values that legitimize continued domination of vulnerable peoples.

⁵⁴ Respondent 11, Nexus Project.

⁵⁵ Peace Direct, "Atrocity Prevention and Peacebuilding," 2018, accessed September 9, 2019, https://www.peacedirect.org/us/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/04/Atrocity-Prevention-Report_PD.pdf.

⁵⁶ See the results of the large civil society and peacebuilding analysis project: Thania Paffenholz, "Summary of Results for a Comparative Research Project: Civil Society and Peacebuilding," 2009, accessed June 23, 2018, https://www.sfcg.org/events/pdf/CCDP_Working_Paper_4-1%20a.pdf.

⁵⁷ Paul Muldoon has made this point in discussing reconciliation politics in indigenous-settler contexts, noting how, "democracy cannot cordon off its own values and institutions from contestation without opening itself up to claims of arbitrariness and violence," in Paul Muldoon, "The Very Basis of Civility: On Agonism, Conquest and Reconciliation," in *The Politics of Reconciliation in Multicultural Societies*, eds. Will Kymlicka and Bashir Bashir (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 117. Also see Ernesto Verdeja, "Political Reconciliation in Postcolonial Settler Societies," *International Political Science Review* 38, no. 2 (2017), 227-241.

⁵⁸ See for example, Thania Paffenholz, ed., *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2010); Alexander Hirsch, ed., *Theorizing Post-Conflict Reconciliation: Agonism, Restitution and Repair* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

Conclusion

Practitioners and scholars have made enormous advances in understanding the warning signs of impending atrocities, the primary causes of mass violence, and the appropriate combination of responses. The maturation of the prevention field over the past two decades is indeed impressive. However, as this article has discussed, there are several areas where a critical approach can contribute to ongoing prevention work. These include problematizing the “bracketing” of global and regional contextualization that results in treating the nation-state as an analytical monad, examining the problem of securitization and connections to state power, pushing for an expansion of the kinds of violence under the purview of prevention, identifying the consequences of privileging expert knowledge, and noting the limitations of global north engagements with local actors.

In essence, the critical approach presses several questions: prevention *for whom* (who is designated a worthy victim, who is not), prevention of *what* (what harms are worthy of response, what forms of life qualify for protection), and *why* prevention (whose interests and voices determine which cases meet the threshold of response)? In answering these questions, we get a better sense of the selective nature of the *when*, *where* and *how* of actual prevention efforts.

In some situations, a critical approach involves deepening efforts that are already in place, or at least acknowledged as important, even if they are pursued only in the breach. In others, the approach laid out here encourages a more radical change in prevention work, calling on rethinking – and contesting – the boundaries of what is the appropriate scope of prevention by asking what is left out. Given ongoing violence across many regions of the world, this work is all the more urgent.

Acknowledgements

A number of people have read drafts of this paper or had valuable conversations with me on this topic. My thanks to the editors of this special section, Alexander L. Hinton and Andrew Woolford, and also to Jobb Arnold, Hollie Nyseth Brehm, Susan D. Collins, Daniel Feierstein, Garrett FitzGerald, Christian Gudehus, Douglas Irvin-Erickson, Mary Keys, George Lopez, Benjamin Meiches, Colleen Mitchell, Adam Muller, Laurie Nathan, Rashied Omar, Atalia Omer, Max Pensky, Daniel Philpott, Emma Planinc, Patrick Regan, Sidney Simpson, Struan Sinclair, Guillermo Trejo, James Waller, Kerry Whigham, Veronica Zubillaga, Michael Zuckert, Julia Zulver, the journal’s anonymous reviewers, and participants in the Critical Genocide Prevention Workshop (U. Manitoba), the Kroc-Kellogg Peace, Conflict, Crime and Violence Workshop (U. Notre Dame), and the Political Theory Colloquium (U. Notre Dame).

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