

Preface

The Dark Side of Humans

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Hardly a day goes by without the international media confronting us with news about mass atrocities, war, civil war, and genocidal events. Given the mass media's penchant for topicality, sensationalism, and the spectacular, the bulk of this news usually remains highly superficial. It may also result in serious misrepresentations, for instance in the recent gross overemphasis placed on terrorism especially by ISIS and other Islamic fundamentalist groups as well as the comparative underreporting of the far more massive, lethal violence of states – for example by the Syrian regime in Syria or by Russia in Ukraine. Often the media only offers its audience snippets and fragments of gruesome realities, which are presented as 'facts'. But the lack of contextualization, continuity in reporting, and sound analysis frequently impede real comprehension and understanding. Therefore, the daily stream of bad news tends to leave the public quite often dumbfounded.

None of these criticisms apply to this book. In the separate chapters, carefully selected and introduced by the editor, a team of young, international scholars make thorough and profound efforts to describe, understand, and explain diverse aspects of the causes, courses, and consequences of genocidal events and processes. To be sure, each case is different from the next one, and it requires specific knowledge to be able to answer the questions these scholars come up with. But any reader who is alert not only to the differences but also the similarities and who is willing to use his/her imagination may also gather valuable comparative knowledge and insights into the nature of genocide and related mass atrocities. Violence between people, individually and especially collectively, belongs to the core of such phenomena. Understanding the manifold preconditions, the workings and the diverse effects of collective violence in and between state-societies is thus essential to gain more insight into mass atrocities and genocide.

One of the most frequently asked questions in this context is how we can understand the callous, ruthless, and cruel ways in which some people may treat other people in situations of war, civil war, and genocide. This question about the dark side of human beings seems to be the most troubling for the general public and many academic specialists alike. It also looms large in the background of this book. A promising starting point in looking for an

answer may be found in the powerful words written by Sigmund Freud in 1930 in his small book on *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

[M]en are not gentle creatures, who want to be loved, who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him... As a rule this cruel aggressiveness waits for some provocation or puts itself at the service of some other purpose, whose goal might also have been reached by milder measures. In circumstances that are favorable to it, when the mental counterforces which ordinarily inhibit it are out of action, it also manifests itself spontaneously and reveals man as a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien.¹

When Freud wrote these words he was already in his seventies, and his statement might be seen as a general conclusion reached after a long life of studying people and societies. This observation combines valuable psychological insight about people with a clear sociological awareness of the impact of the wider circumstances under which they are bound to live. People are complex beings with often contradictory affects and impulses, and – knowingly or unwittingly – full of ambiguity and ambivalence. They long for acknowledgement, respect, and love. They have a disposition for cooperation; they are constructive; they may like and love each other. But they also possess a disposition for competition and conflict; they may be aggressive and destructive; and they may despise, hate, and destroy each other. Which dispositions, affects, and impulses will dominate and in what sort of combinations largely depends on the larger historical, social, and cultural conditions. Freud suggests that the darker side of people will come to the surface under circumstances in which the mental counterforces which normally act as inhibitions no longer function.

Much could be said about these circumstances, but three suggestions will have to suffice here. First, the capacity of people for empathy and identification with others is limited. Although it can be argued that the

1 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton & Co., 1961), pp. 58–59.

'circles of identification' for many people have expanded in the course of the history of humanity, positive feelings towards all others as fellow human beings are still flawed, highly fragile, and vulnerable. Moreover, under general conditions of crisis – serious polarization in and between groups and societies, war, and civil war – such feelings will diminish for many. Instead, desensitization, disidentification, and hate may grow. A second dark side of people resides in their capacity to believe in, or even become hypnotized by, all sorts of unfounded illusions and delusions. One may think here of the grand religious delusions and utopian political ideologies such as national socialism and fascism, communism and nationalism. At the same time, one should also keep in mind the countless conspiracy theories and collective hate-fantasies that flourish in large parts of our present world. Such fantasies impede empathy and often facilitate the third dark side of people: the inclination to use violence instead of milder means to solve existing differences and disputes.

It would be naive to believe that these closely interrelated dark sides of people can easily disappear. But it does not seem naive to believe that empathy between people may be fostered, that hate-fantasies may be disputed, and that the use of violence may be further reined in. The essays in this book, each in their own way, point in that direction.

