

Interview with Dr. Gerald Caplan

An Interdisciplinary Examination of Genocide

Dr. Gerald Caplan is a leading authority on genocide and genocide prevention. He holds his Ph.D. in African History from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. He is a senior consultant for the UN Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa and has just completed a report for the Africa Union and UNICEF on *The State of Africa's Children*. Dr. Caplan is the author of *Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide*, a 300-page report for the International Panel of Eminent Personalities to Investigate the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda. He recently published a new book entitled *The Betrayal of Africa*.

You've written about the insight to human nature apparent in the reoccurrence of genocide. Can you expand on that idea and the implications of this on prevention?

Anne Frank once said "despite everything, I believe that people are really good at heart." Although we would like to hold onto this belief, the experience of the world tells us a different story. History shows that every human being has the capacity to commit the most horrific crimes against humanity for a range of reasons not quite understood. No one is immune from war and acts of violence. Prevention, therefore, means recognizing this potential within the human spirit and taking steps to create circumstances that prohibit it from prevailing over the better parts of our nature.

What significance would you assign to labeling atrocities with the word "genocide"?

This is a very important and challenging question. On the one hand, genocide remains the crime of crimes against humanity and therefore requires a special and separate identity. On the other hand, the absence of this title cannot be used as an excuse for non-intervention, as was arguably the case with Rwanda and still is with Darfur. While the significance of this name cannot be underestimated, action cannot be dependent

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on whether it is or is not called genocide. We need to recognize the ultimate evil of genocide for what it is rather than what it is called—and take the necessary actions to stop it.

From your experience, what role do you think activism, local and national, can play in influencing change on the policy level? What is the role for academics?

Activism is a critical element to call attention to acts of genocide and also understanding the reality of political change. When Samantha Powers asked Anthony Lake, the former national security adviser to President Clinton “Why was there no intervention in Rwanda when it was clear that extreme violence was taking place?” he responded by saying: “the phones didn’t ring.” When pressed, he elaborated by admitting that there was not significant pressure from NGOs, civil society, or the media to bring this issue to the national stage. Without this insistence by the public to act, the government did not feel obligated to respond to the growing crisis. His response offers civil society a strong and clear lesson for the future.

That said, we come to the genocide in Darfur—where we have witnessed the most vocal, high profile, well-funded solidarity and advocacy movement arguably since the anti-Vietnam era of the late 1960s. The President of the United States and the Secretary of State both confirmed the events of Darfur to be categorized as genocide. Despite the broad spectrum of activism and the use of the term genocide, there was still no action taken by the UN Security Council. Why?

It became painfully clear that every member’s government, for their own self-interest, valued maintaining friendly relations with Sudan over saving thousands of lives. The Bush administration was working with Sudan on counter-terrorism activities, while other governments continued to strengthen their ties with Sudan through trade of guns or oil. The reality is that governments did not intervene to stop the genocide because doing so would jeopardize their own political and financial agendas.

I strongly believe that broad-based civil society activism is the only way to pressure governments to act against genocide or the threat of an impending genocide. Yet, as the case with Darfur’s solidarity movement illustrated, that is not always enough. Governments need the political will to act on the pleas of activists and victims.

On the other hand, honestly, I don’t see a special role for academics in changing policy on genocide. There are some scholars that seek truth and there are others that do not. There were many academics that defended the position that events in Rwanda were not genocide, as well as many academics that, to this day, deny the atrocities committed against the Armenians. Academics, like anyone else, can present slanted information.

You have been very critical of the ability of the international community to “help” in the case of genocide. What do you believe to be appropriate kinds of responses for the international community

to undertake?

There is no one response to genocide, nor is there a “most appropriate” response at a given moment. It is a complex dynamic that depends entirely on the nature and stage of the crisis. One of the most tragic aspects of the Rwandan genocide was how easily it could have been prevented by concerted international action. I often wonder what would have happened if the Pope had flown in and met with the Rwandan government about stopping the increased violence. With a 60 percent Catholic population, I doubt the Rwandan Government could ignore a direct message from the Pope and overlook all of the local nuns and priests on the ground reinforcing the Pope’s urge for peace. Similarly, the French government had a special relationship with the Rwandan government and could have strategically used its influence to curb the violence. If the UN Security Council sent a force of 5,000 with an appropriate mandate, I suspect the outcome would have also been different. The fact that a small contingent of UN peacekeepers was present on the ground during the violence but did little to stop it is proof of the UN’s great failure.

On the other hand, in the case of Sudan, I don’t believe that intervention from white Westerners would have been useful. I suspect that any such intervention would have to be approached with great sensitivity for fear of further fueling the conflict. Yet there is always something that can and must be done to respond. In Sudan there were a wide range of sanctions that the UN never used and a series of empty threats that never amounted to any real change. The international community has a range of tools it could use to shift the trajectory of genocide, but it has thus far failed to know what tools to implement to make a real difference.

Do you think the responsiveness and actions of the international community towards genocide have changed over the years?

Indeed, things have changed—except for the rhetoric. Every time you hear a politician say “never again,” you can guarantee that they are lying. Every U.S. President from Reagan to Obama has made grand speeches that declare the words “never again,” and yet each one has allowed some terrible disaster to go unnoticed. Inaction has been the reoccurring theme in all of these administrations. President Obama just recently retracted yet another campaign promise to recognize the Armenian genocide and hold the Turkish government accountable for it. Once they enter into positions of power, politicians become more cynical about risking their political capital—which is why the role of activists is so important. It is up to civil society to push decision-makers to act upon their consciences; otherwise it should come as no surprise that nothing will change.

Although the lack of political will is a perennial problem, this is not to suggest that there have not been significant developments that have paved the way for more substantial responses by the international community. For example, the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948; the announcement by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (after the

10th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide) to appoint a Special Advisor on Genocide Prevention and launch an Action Plan to Prevent Genocide; and the developing mechanisms of the International Criminal Court to work towards retribution—these are all key breakthroughs toward creating the foundation for political action. These advancements on paper are important, but we have a long way to go before the political will to act on these tools exists.

Given that the fields of genocide studies and prevention are so broad, how do you measure progress and change? Can you identify recent trends in the field?

Academically speaking, there has been remarkable expansion in the field of genocide far beyond what was typically identified as Holocaust studies. For a long time, the field lacked any significant consideration of other genocides. The comparative dimension of genocide studies has really reshaped the landscape of the field in significant ways. By interweaving the Armenian, Cambodian, Rwandan, and other experiences together, a fuller awareness of the complexity of the problem can be unpacked. Such a comparative approach also allows scholars and decision-makers to identify trends and create indicators to predict and prepare for genocide. This type of approach is very new and provides the research that forces the public to take the problem seriously. This is a major change from past approaches that treat each case of genocide like an individual outlier.

In addition, the literature on genocide has increased significantly. Today you can find entire curriculums, textbooks, and journals wholly dedicated to the topic of genocide and all its sub-fields. This boom of research is important and necessary to mobilize civil society and educate policymakers.

What do you think is the most important element for post-genocide healing for both the individuals affected and for the nation?

Unfortunately, no one knows the answer to this question. The issues of reconciliation and justice are infinitely difficult because most of the time they contradict each other. For example, it is often cited that the Hutu are anxious for democracy and the Tutsi want justice. The Hutu believe that, with another election, they would be voted into power through a majority vote; meanwhile, the Tutsi would rather see justice than votes. This illustrates how difficult it is to assess the needs of victims and of the nation in a post-crisis situation—and how often these needs are not compatible.

Put yourself in their shoes. Would you be able to move on without apology or any signs of remorse? This was one of the failures of the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa—when mothers heard about the brutality of their children’s murder, do you think they were then ready to forgive? No. They often came away feeling more angry and wounded.

No one has an exact formula on how to heal after the atrocities of genocide. Every member of society, regardless of their degree of involvement, requires healing (even

the perpetrators). This remains a major problem in both Rwanda and Turkey—what do you do with all the individuals that killed your family? And what should the government response be? I wish I knew the answer to these questions.

Do you have any final thoughts?

The problem of genocide is very complex; but as the field develops, it is able to shape the dialogue around prevention, healing, and justice in hopefully meaningful ways. The International Center for Transitional Justice in New York is the first organization of its kind to bring all the issues of post-crisis recovery under one umbrella and take a more holistic approach. Until it came along, there was very little of this work being done outside of ad hoc initiatives. Many aspects of study within genocide have now become their own fields (for example, prevention, reconciliation, deterrence, international coordination, etc.). For better or worse, this “industry” is growing and will continue to grow to the point that we will hopefully be more equipped to handle and stop the next genocide.

The problem, however, with genocide prevention is that you never really know when you have achieved it. Suppose the Pope had visited Rwanda and the series of events that followed were different—how would we be able to know what would have been? This is a serious conceptual problem with advocating for prevention. Since it cannot be proved, and decision-makers often require evidence that their action will make a difference, inaction is easily justified. The challenge of the field is to show evidence for the link between “game-changing” moves and a shift in the conflict. This is a difficult case to make because the tendency to default into inaction is, unfortunately, still the dominant response.

