Ordinary Organizations
A Systems Theory Approach to Perpetrator Studies

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The point of departure for a systems theoretical analysis of genocides in modern societies is the observation that most genocides are carried out by members of state organizations of force. State organizations of force are organizations such as armies, militias, or the police that use the threat of force, or force itself, in order to implement state decisions. They differ from non-state organizations of force, such as gangs, terrorist organizations, or marauding bands of mercenaries, in that they can justify their actions by claiming to enforce demands that have been legitimized by the state. The simple realization that most genocides were killing campaigns based largely on state organizations is hardly an original insight. When it comes to analyzing the organizational framework for these activities, however, researchers—particularly the few sociologists who have participated in the discussion of genocides—have worked with a view of organizations that borders on caricature and that can ultimately be traced back to Max Weber. Under the influence of Weber’s description of the machine-like “bureaucratic mechanism” (Weber 1976, 562), with its “precision,” “speed,” “unambiguity,” “knowledge of the files,” “continuity,” “discretion,” “unity,” “strict subordination,” and “reduction of friction,” genocides have been construed as a product of the use of “bureaucratic mechanisms” that were suited to killing people on a massive scale. According to this interpretation, genocides involved the implementation of concepts such as the “optimal use of resources” and a “diligent and professional approach.” Because of the division of labor, the “desk murderers” would have perceived the victims solely as a “depersonalized” entity, a “column of numbers.”

This machine-like understanding of organizations is embedded in an explanation that interprets genocides as a phenomenon of modernity. As this interpretation has it, the Enlightenment was the source of the “deadly combination” of cold calculation and bureaucratic machinery that gave rise to the “monster of modernity.” In its efforts to achieve perfection through organizations, the Holocaust, for example, according to Zygmunt Bauman, was a “code of modernity,” a “legitimate resident in the house of modernity” (1989, 17f). Bauman said the goal of modernity was a “better,” “more efficient,” “more beautiful” world, and the mass murder of the Jews was an attempt to realize this ideal (1989, 17f).

With Max Weber’s understanding of organizations, genocides in modern society can only be explained as a “bureaucratically planned” and “industrially executed” “administrative mass
murder” (Arendt 1984). Especially, the reception of the Holocaust is characteristic of this understanding. For example, Martin Heidegger (2012, 53) said shortly after World War II that the Holocaust was regarded primarily as the “fabrication of corpses,” as “hundreds of thousands” being “unobtrusively liquidated.” The Holocaust has thus come to be seen as an instance of an “entire people” being “obliterated without a trace” in “death factories,” in the words of Wolfgang Sofsky (1997, 259). The “death factory” is presented as an “apparatus that functioned smoothly,” where people were murdered “at a high capacity and speed”—even though we know from sociological studies of car and aircraft factories that a “smoothly functioning apparatus” is pure management fiction. From this perspective, the only possible synonym for the Holocaust is “Auschwitz”—not the frequently improvised mass shootings or sometimes-chaotic ghetto liquidations.

**Beyond the View of Organizations as Machines**

By basing their explanations on a simplified understanding of organizations, genocide researchers inherited all the problems that were characteristic of Weberian organizational research: overemphasizing the goal-oriented rationality of organizations, disregarding the fact that organizations frequently have conflicting goals, underestimating the contradictions in the orientation of people’s actions, ignoring “bottom-up” initiatives, and neglecting the importance of the “sousveillance of superiors,” which gives subordinates significant influence over the decisions made by top-level personnel.

This insufficiently complex view of the organizations involved in genocides—in which every single member, almost to the top of the organization, seems to be merely a cog in the machine—has made it easy to reject explanations that focus on organizations. Such a simplified view has been justifiably criticized for portraying people as nothing more than “puppet-like actors” (Goldhagen 2007, 196), “pawns” (Goldhagen 2007, 196), or “soulless technocrats” (Heyl 1996, 1). It leaves the impression that we are dealing solely with “obedient and submissive executors of an ideology” (Paul 2002 17), “unfeeling command automatons” (Paul 2002, 17), or “dispassionate desk murderers” (Heyl 1996, 23). Critics say this “denies the moral agency and assent of the perpetrators,” leading us to assume that “they were compelled to act by forces external to them (Friedländer 2012, 481).”

Though most of the rival parties neither mentioned nor even noticed it, genocide research became the arena for a debate about organizations that had already taken place in a more general form decades earlier. When psychologists, business economists, and sociologists began to take an interest in the phenomenon of the organization in the late nineteenth century, the dominant image was one in which people were of interest solely in terms of how they fit into a machine-like structure. According to the structuralist assumption prevalent at the time, you merely had to establish an efficient network of rules and chains of command, then identify the people best suited to each position in the network and lure them in with attractive compensation.

As a critical response to this reduction of personnel to a pure “fulfillment function” in a more or less rational organization, another concept emerged that was shaped by a voluntaristic view of humanity and considered the human factor to be crucial in understanding organizations. The sociologically naïve belief here was that organizations are made up of people, so their success or failure must depend exclusively on the composition of their personnel. The result was a fairly unproductive confrontation between researchers who paid little heed to the importance of personnel because of their view of organizations as machines and researchers who tried to explain organizational phenomena
solely through the motivations of an organization’s personnel. Representatives of the former position tended to underestimate the importance of the people in an organization, while representatives of the latter tended to overestimate it (see for this argument Luhmann 2000, 279).

Neither Structuralism nor Voluntarism

The sociological theory of “ordinary organizations” has nothing to do with the oversimplified image of organizations as machines, nor does it fall back on a purely voluntaristic explanation for the actions of people in organizations. One of the strengths of sociological systems theory is that it does not pit an approach geared towards structures against an approach geared towards people, as is frequently assumed. Instead—and this is the key point—it views people as structural features of social systems such as organizations, small groups, protest movements, or families. Even non-sociologists can immediately grasp the fact that the certainty of expectations in small groups, protest movements, and families—as well as organizations—is based not only on roles but also on an understanding of the different ways people act.12

By adopting this perspective, organizational sociology, which is informed by systems theory, can help overcome the opposition between the “structuralist approach” and the “voluntaristic approach” in genocide research.13 We can then view the actions of the members of organizations active in genocides as more than merely actions in the context of a very precisely defined formal membership role, and we can also explain why these people took the initiative in killing people, actively contributed to refining the processes for deportation and killing, frequently carried out shootings at the limits of what was tolerated by the organization, and often committed atrocities enthusiastically.14,15

Generalization of Motives

A sociologically informed study of genocides must do more than merely recount the possible motives of organizational members. Historians and psychologists have almost seamlessly defined “typologies of perpetrators”—the “eager killer” who enjoyed killing other human beings and therefore volunteered for execution commandos and tortured victims before shooting them and “celebrated their murderous deeds” afterwards; the “passive follower” who “did whatever they were asked to do” but who did not view killing as a “redemptive deed”; the “unwilling perpetrator,” who was critical of the killings but did not actively refuse to take part in ghetto clearances, deportations, or shootings.16 Such typologies lend themselves to debating the relative percentages of “willing executioners,” “passive followers,” and “unwilling perpetrators.”

The perpetrator typologies that are mobilized in the fierce debate surrounding the respective percentages of “willing,” “unwilling,” or “passive” executioners are far too simplistic for a sociological analysis. Instead of squeezing the people involved into just a few categories, it is much more interesting to look at how organizations deal with the fact that their members will have differing motives. Many genocides were not carried out solely, or even largely, by people whose convictions aligned with one of an organization’s goals. In fact, the participants differed greatly in their motives, their willingness to kill, and their reaction to the killing operations. The fact that they ultimately acted uniformly and effectively nonetheless can only be understood by viewing their actions from a central perspective: the generalization of motives for membership in organizations.
From the viewpoint of the leadership of many killing organizations, the organization should be made up of members who completely identify with the organization and will be fully engaged in fulfilling their organizational role. The ideal seems to be a killing organization in which the motives of the members perfectly align with the goals of the organization so the members never distance themselves from the performance of their roles. Very few organizations actually rely on the fact that the goal of the organization alone will be enough to motivate its members to carry out all of the tasks expected of them. This is why although organizations will try to recruit members who identify with their goals, they will use additional means to motivate their members: coercion, money, collegial expectations, or attractive activities.

The trick that organizations use is to generalize the motivations of their members. Regardless of which motives were or are relevant to a member joining and remaining in an organization, by formalizing membership expectations (i.e., making continued membership dependent on fulfilling formal expectations), organizations ultimately ensure that members to whom the organization attributes very different motives will still submit to their expectations (Luhmann 1964, 132). All organization members must gear themselves towards these formal expectations—including those who identify closely with the organization’s overarching goal and could therefore become a problem for the organization (because such people tend to independently “translate” this overarching goal into concrete action). If an enthusiastic Wehrmacht soldier had decided it would make more sense to fight on the Eastern front than the Western and had reported for duty there instead, he would probably have been sentenced for desertion.17

By generalizing the motives for membership, the killing organizations achieve a certain degree of flexibility. Organizations can only achieve elasticity by separating the goals of the organization from the motives of its members. This makes it possible for an organization to change its goals (within certain limits) without immediately having to wonder whether it will still be attractive to its members. Elastic organizations can adapt better to changed demands (from the government, for example) than those that have to carefully check whether changed goals might frustrate their members (see Luhmann 1964, 103). Armies and police forces take advantage of the flexibility offered by the separation of goals and motives. For example, for the Reich Security Main Office, it was useful to be able to order houses and farmsteads to be burned down during retaliation operations or, if need be, to keep the burning of houses and farmsteads “to a minimum” in order to ensure continued agricultural production.

It would almost be comforting if genocides could be explained by a single motive—for example, that during the Holocaust a mob of fervent Nazis had come together to put their program of “eliminationist antisemitism” into action, or that “racist indoctrination” had succeeded in infecting large parts of the population. Then all it would take to prevent other genocides would be to identify the “racist mob” and fight it using political means or to counter racist indoctrination with an awareness campaign. What is unsettling about many genocides—and especially about the Holocaust—from a sociological perspective is that, when it comes to organized violence, the motives driving people to participate in torture, shootings, or gassings are of secondary importance. Organizations specializing in violence must naturally take into account that some of their members will fully identify with the goal of the killings (when the organization’s goals largely correspond to the members’ own motives), some will be more neutral towards the goals of the organization and can be “bought off” or “compelled” to take part in actions considered reasonable by the organization, and some may be skeptical towards the specific actions expected of them. All that matters to the organization in the end is that the actions it demands are actually carried out.
The Challenges of a Systems Approach

For non-sociologists, the systems approach poses a challenge. As a scientific discipline, sociology does not approach genocides from a moral perspective. It seems self-evident to us today that the execution of thousands of human beings for ethnic, religious, or political reasons constituted mass murder, meaning that the “killers” were automatically “perpetrators” in both a moral and legal sense and should have been, or should be, prosecuted as mass murderers. But this self-evident categorization of violent acts from a modern perspective makes it more difficult to reconstruct the prevailing rules of legitimacy and, more precisely, of legality of the relevant organizations at the time. In a sociological analysis, it is necessary to strive for the most neutralizing choice of words possible. For example, only by first referring to “mass killings” instead of “mass murders” is it possible to imagine how, depending on the perspective and point in time, mass killings can obviously appear to be mass murders—or not.

This challenge is further intensified by the fact that the focus on organizations shifts the focus away from the victims. This conflicts with a growing demand for genocides not to be explained or recounted from a perspective that focuses on the perpetrators (much less from the perspective of the perpetrators) but rather from a perspective that focuses on (or, better yet, from the perspective of) the victims. This may be compatible with the demand occasionally heard in the field of the sociology of violence that “thick descriptions” be used to make the “torment of the victims” visible. But when it comes to a sociological approach, the moralistic debate as to whether a “perpetrator perspective” should be replaced by a “victim perspective,” or whether we need a “theory of suffering” instead of a “theory of the deed,” is irrelevant.

Whether or to what extent forms of violence must be analyzed with a view to the perpetrators or the victims depends on the subject being analyzed. For a sociological analysis of ghettos, concentration camps, or extermination camps, the perspective of the victims has to be taken into account because—as suggested by sociological studies of prisons and psychiatric hospitals—this type of analysis requires that we look at the interaction between the members of the state organizations of force and the inhabitants of the ghettos or the prisoners in the concentration and extermination camps. By contrast, a perspective that focuses on the victims—or, indeed, the perspective of the victims—plays a subordinate role when it comes to the understanding of deportations and mass executions. This is not because sociologists want to close their eyes to the suffering of the victims—who could do that, after all?—but because, in this case, the victims’ perspective does little to help us explain what happened.

What makes the challenge even greater is that sociologists typically reconstruct the rationalities that underlie events (see Reemtsma 2002, 89). Some genocide researchers take the view that the deportations, mass shootings, and killings in the extermination camps simply cannot be explained. This touches on a sociologically relevant aspect as well, namely, that many acts of violence cannot be fully understood from the perspective of rationalities, or even motives, due to the dynamics of conflict inherent in them. But even when we pay more heed to the internal dynamics of processes of violence, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the participants in such processes often persistently attribute rationalities to themselves and others. From a sociological standpoint, however—and this is what makes sociology as a scientific discipline so suspect for many non-sociologists—there is no systematic reason that genocides cannot be reconstructed in exactly the same way as the development of atomic energy, the emergence of new regimes of factory work, or the genesis of universal human rights.
The Destruction of the European Jews
It was merely the precursor of the destruction of the Jews in Rwanda in 1994 or the genocide in the former Yugoslavia in 1991–5. But when it comes, for example, to the Holocaust, this explanation only applies to the phase from late 1944 to early May 1945. The difference between the Holocaust and many other mass killings of political, ethnic, or religious minorities is precisely that the Holocaust had the strong support of the state system.

3 Even taking more recent sociological works on the subject into account, one could almost say that there was a type of organization called “organizational sociological ignorance” at play here. The most prominent example of such ignorance is Bauman (1989, 18), who ignores all of the more advanced organizational sociological approaches. But even more recent innovative sociological studies, which look at the interaction between perpetrators and victims by focusing on spaces (see, for example Christ 2011), largely neglect the organizational perspective.

4 This is according to Bauman (1989, 76 and 99). Bauman adopts Weber’s understanding of organizations, as can be seen in the fact that he frequently refers to “bureaucracies” instead of “organizations.” However, a similar use of terminology can be found in Raul Hilberg’s The Destruction of the European Jews (Hilberg 1985, 56). For a critical view of this, see Berg (2003, 135) and Waller (2010). An interesting examination of Bauman’s bureaucracy theory can be found in Du Gay (2000).

5 Despite this criticism, sociology did make a contribution by following in the tradition of Raphael Lemkin’s thinking during World War II and exposing as a myth the notion that the Holocaust should be viewed as a “return to barbarity,” an “operational accident of history,” or an “aberration of German mentality” (Lemkin 1944). National Socialism began to be interpreted as a phenomenon of modern society very early on. We need look no further than Arendt (1979); in response to this, see, for example, Stone (1996, 36), and Stone (2010, 113).

6 The clincher in Bauman’s argument is that, in his view, modernity not only supplied the means for genocide—the bureaucratic organization, the killing technologies, and the binding factors affecting the personnel—but also the purpose; regarding Bauman’s understanding of the Holocaust, (see, for example, Imbusch 2005, 449). For a critique of Bauman, see, for example, Chalk and Jonassohn 1990, 5; Freeman 1995, 214; Stone 2003, 239.

7 Sofsky and Bauman view organizations as a core aspect of explaining the Holocaust, but they almost entirely ignore key research in organizational sociology. I suspect that both of them more or less blindly follow Weber’s bureaucracy theory, though in Sofsky’s case this stands in stark contrast to his deliberations on the figuration of social power as developed with Rainer Paris; see Sofsky & Paris 1994. For an early reference to the concept of the death factory, see Arendt (1994, 159); for a detailed examination of the concept of the death factory, see Lüdtke (1996).

8 Regarding this criticism, see, for example, Kiepe (2007, 58) or Bloxham (2008, 209). Sofsky (1997, 260) is aware of the “primitive pattern” behind Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka, but for him the “high degree of improvisation” was not part of the “organizational routine.” It was merely the precursor of a more rational form of extermination in Auschwitz-Birkenau; in “Violence: Terrorism, Genocide, War,” however, Sofsky (2003, 68) himself warns against applying “the bureaucratic concept to processes of collective violence.” The focus on Auschwitz also seems to be important because the uniqueness of Auschwitz rests solely on the fact that killing was organized in a factory-like way there.

9 For an early list of these weaknesses in Weber’s model of organizations, see Luhmann 1971; see also the summary in Kühl 2013, 52 and 71.

10 Criticism of the machine model in Holocaust research was often combined with criticism of the so-called functionalist approach, according to which the decision to carry out the Holocaust was a product of the competition between different administrative departments of the Nazi state. Explanations like these were said to result in “individual responsibility” disappearing in a “fog of abstract processes” and “unplanned initiatives”; see, for example, Saul Friedländer (2012, 481).

11 see note 4.

12 Regarding the distinction between people and roles, see the detailed study by Niklas Luhmann (2014, 62). Different member-based systems are distinguished from one another in what they ascribe to people and to roles; see the foundational work by Stefan Kühl (2014, 65–85).
13 Even in sociology, there is a split between action theories on the one hand and structural theories on the other. Ambitious theorists have repeatedly tried to overcome this split, however. Take, for example, the theory of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1996), which proposes that structures are objectified by the actions of people or Anthony Giddens’ (1984) theoretical enhancement of the sociological truism that structures enable the actions of social agents and these structures are reproduced by the acts of agents, or Nicos P. Mouzelis’ (1991) attempt to position structural constraints and freedom of action on different levels of society. But even authors who are often prematurely branded as structural theorists, such as Talcott Parsons or Niklas Luhmann, have made ambitious attempts to reconcile action and structure.

14 This makes it possible to overcome the simplistic contrast between voluntariness and coercion, and between the person and the structure, in Holocaust research. The aim is also to scrupulously avoid such Solomonic statements as “impersonal structures as well as collective and individual actors are important” when explaining genocides; quoted in Gerlach (2010, 283). In the language of rational choice theory, we could say that the precise definition of the relationship between collective and individual agents is the key to understanding what is being attributed to personal or impersonal structures and by whom. For a more thorough application of rational choice theory, see Douglas C. North et al. 2009.

15 see note 5.

16 As an example, see Browning 1998, 151; regarding the heterogeneous motives of the German SS men, police officers, firemen, and forestry officers, see also, e.g., Klemp 1998, 97; Paul 2002, 50; Browder 2003, 409; Curilla 2011, 875.

17 See Luhmann 1973, 266. The impulse to take independent action to achieve a higher goal is referred to in German sociology as the “Prince of Homburg effect”; see Bosetzky 1973, 2–5. In the play of the same name by Heinrich von Kleist, the Prince of Homburg ignores instructions from his “boss” Frederick William, Elector of Brandenburg, because the Prince believes that the only way to win the battle is by disobeying orders. As a result of this, he is celebrated as the victor of the battle but runs the risk of being executed for behaving “incorrectly” as an organization member. Luckily for him, love—in the form of a symbolically generalized communication medium—saves the day, and he winds up marrying the Princess of Orange.

18 Regarding the relationship between moral and legal responsibility, see Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 1999, 22). Agamben emphasizes that “the assumption of moral responsibility has value only if one is ready to assume the relevant legal consequences.”

19 see note 6.

20 See the debate in the mid-1980s between Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer regarding the historicization of the Holocaust. See Friedländer 1987, 310–324; Broszat and Friedländer 1990a, 77–87; as well as their correspondence in Broszat and Friedländer 1990b, 102–134. See also Kershaw 1993, 20–41. The controversy is recounted in Frei 2007. The debate prompted Saul Friedländer to call for an integrated Holocaust historiography that would link together the decisions of Nazi organizations, the support and resistance of the population in the German Reich, and the perceptions and reactions of the Jewish population.

21 “The theory of action,” Sofsky (1996, 69) argues, “misappropriates the situation of the subjugated.” He says it is “deaf and blind to the torment of the victims.” Regarding both the analytical and normative character of Sofsky’s centering of violence, see Trotha 1997, 39; regarding the dangers of “victimism,” see Michel Wieviorka (Wieviorka 2009, 63).

22 Regarding this position, see Bauer 1990, 145. The best commentary on the postulate that attempts an explanation would “ruin the unique and unsayable character of Auschwitz” comes from Agamben, who asks “why confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical?” See Agamben 1999, 31.

23 This is the argument of Michael Neumann, (for example, in Neumann 1995, 67). See also Wolfgang Sofsky (1996, 69), who says that violence is fundamentally “meaningless” (“sinnlos”).

24 Regarding this, see Nedelmann (1997, 78f.), who suggests reconstructing the “reciprocal curtains of meaning” relating to violent interactions.

References


