
Making and Unmaking Nations

A CONVERSATION WITH SCOTT STRAUS

FLETCHER FORUM: *What is the “logic of genocide,” as defined by your recent book Making and Unmaking Nations, and what can we learn from it? Similarly, you emphasize that we can draw lessons from non-genocide cases as well as genocides; could you discuss this?*

SCOTT STRAUS: There has been very powerful work done on political violence that aims to understand the logic of violence and why actors choose to act violently. The thinking in these studies is that violence is coercive; you use violence to change the behavior of a certain group of people. If we were at war, I might harm a member of your side to prevent you from defecting from me or providing information to my enemy. Violence basically signals costs. With violence, you’re saying, “If you persist in this act, if you betray us, if you provide information or support to the enemy, it’s going to be costly for you.”

Scott Straus is Professor of Political Science and International Studies at UW-Madison, where he also serves as Associate Chair/Director of Graduate Studies of Political Science. Scott specializes in the study of genocide, political violence, human rights, and African politics. His most recent book publication is *Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa* (Cornell University Press, 2015), and he has also published several books on Rwanda, including *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Cornell University Press, 2006); *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); and *Intimate Enemy* (Zone Books, 2006). His work has also been featured in the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Foreign Affairs*, *World Politics*, *Politics & Society*, *Journal of Genocide Research*, *African Affairs*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, and the *Canadian Journal of African Studies*. Before starting in academia, Scott was a freelance journalist based in Nairobi, Kenya.

My feeling was that that this signaling mechanism does not work in cases of genocide. Genocide is not communicative violence. With genocide, the aim is to destroy groups, rather than to try to shape their behavior.

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One of the purposes of *Making and Unmaking Nations* is to try and uncover whether or not there is a distinctive logic or purpose when perpetrators use genocide as a tactic. The conclusion I come to is that certain conditions facilitate genocide. When groups are seen as threatening—that is, they cannot be won over through coercion, their

behavior cannot be changed, and they cannot be contained to a particular area—these conditions facilitate a logic of destruction and group extermination.

Your point about the negative, or non-genocide, cases is likely the main contribution of the book. The main way people have been studying genocide is to look at what genocide cases have in common. For example, you might compare Rwanda to Bosnia to the Holocaust to Cambodia. You could try to figure out what those countries and situations have in common, and then develop your theory on that basis.

The problem with that approach is that it leads to conclusions that could apply to many more cases than there are actual cases of genocide. The theories that people came up with through that method should predict that genocide is much more frequent than it actually is. So, what I decided to do was to turn the question around: rather than comparing genocide to genocide, we should compare genocides and negative cases, cases where genocides did not happen, to figure out what is different between the places where it did happen versus where it did not.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Comparing these genocide and non-genocide cases, you've mentioned the rhetoric of the state—the concept of “pure nation” versus “plural communities”—as a key factor. Could you elaborate on this?*

STRAUS: The community's own vision of itself—as pure or plural—is one of three main variables, or categories, of restraint that affect whether genocide will occur.

In some countries, leaders really do envision their state as being plural. They see value in an ethnically and religiously plural national community. In those places, historically, genocide hasn't happened. In other places, the

nationalist vision was based on a core ethnic or religious group, with the perception that the nation belonged to that group, and that they therefore should hold power. Those different visions interacted differently with the logic of security in war to typically produce either higher levels of violence against civilians, or lower levels of violence altogether. There were higher levels of violence when the nation had a core nationalist vision, and lower levels in places with a plural, multi-ethnic vision of the state.

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Another variable is the degree of threat in war: how intense an armed conflict is. One of my conclusions is that genocide happens typically in armed conflicts. It is a strategy of violence in war. However, even in armed conflicts of similar intensity, leaders choose different strategies—some choose accommodation, some choose to escalate violence. Ultimately, I found that the decision of whether or not to use genocide as a tactic came down to which sort of nationalist vision the leadership held: what I call “founding narratives.” To understand these, we must ask, “What is the core political community according to the nationalist vision, what are the main political goals, and who is supposed to control power?”

Finally, there is a third category of restraint, beyond the nationalist vision, beyond the nature of the war. The capacity of the state is another factor that would restrain leaders from escalating violence in a serious way against civilians from a particular group. If the government does not control a population, it is not able to inflict violence over time and space, which is a restraint. Or, economic incentives may lead a government to moderate the violence. For example, if the leaders find that committing this level of violence would seriously damage the economy or state revenue, this might create an incentive for moderation or restraint. So those are the three main factors.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Do you see these factors borne out by global trends? For example, do countries trend more toward the narrative of “pure nations” or more toward plural communities?*

STRAUS: I do not really see trends. It is difficult to measure the characteristics of nationalism quantitatively, so we don't have very good data cross-nationally on that issue. I would say that cross-nationally, war is in decline.

If you look at the probability of mass killing or genocide, the probability is much lower now than it has been for twenty to thirty, forty to fifty years, and

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a lot of that has to do with the decline of the number of armed conflicts in the world. So there is a correlation between the decline of armed conflict in general and the decline of mass killing and genocide episodes. While that could change, that is the strongest trend that I have seen. I do not know if there is a trend in national rhetoric, however.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In your view, does globalization shape or alter this national rhetoric in any way? Specifically, what is the impact of the more porous borders and arguably looser notions of nation-states we see in the world today?*

STRAUS: I think that the nation-state remains the main locus of power in the world today. I think it is true that there is a liberalization of markets and, to a degree, increased population flows, but I still think the nation-state is the main site of the nation. International actors can influence what happens in a nation, but genocide is principally a domestic story about domestic politics. That could be a function of my training, but that's how I see it.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Framing genocide as a domestic story, then, what connections do you see between local and international actors?*

STRAUS: One of the arguments in *Making and Unmaking Nations* has to do with alliances between national actors and local actors, and the central claim of the book is that you need both in order for genocide to occur. National actors serve in a coordinating function, to authorize and make genocide possible, and local actors play a role in identifying victims and separating them from non-targeted organizations. Also, local actors frequently commit the actual violence. That matters because, very often, when thinking about the origins of violence, we think about either only the local origins and local connections of violence, or only the national origins of violence. I think both national and local groups must be involved to reach this level of violence; therefore, you need a model that can explain that interaction between local and national actors.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Could you comment on the role of genocide research and prevention? Specifically, how best can we balance local context awareness, which is often qualitative in nature, with the data-based forecasting approaches taken by the international community?*

STRAUS: I think that forecasting is a great asset in an overall prevention strategy. You want to have a strong sense of which countries are more likely and less likely to see this level of violence. Forecasting is just a huge sorting tool: you can go from a hundred and ninety-three countries in the world down to ten or fifteen, and forecasting is great at that. However, the problem is then which of those ten or fifteen countries you identify as at risk will experience genocide, and then when, among those ten or fifteen, is something going to happen?

The bang for your buck after forecasting is going to occur through qualitative research. Qualitative research gives us the ability to really know something about these countries by looking at the rhetoric, the history, the coalitions of actors and what they are doing, and the way in which states and non-state groups are interacting in a military sense. Those are the kinds of things that are difficult to capture through quantitative methods because we just don't have the data. Qualitative research, on the other hand, requires careful in-country analysis. I think of forecasting as a sorting tool, and the next step is in-depth qualitative research into the dynamics of what is happening in the country.

FLETCHER FORUM: *This recalls the diagnostic tool that you developed in the appendix of Making and Unmaking Nations.¹ Could you elaborate on how that diagnostic fits into the strategy just mentioned?*

STRAUS: Sure. I was trying to create a framework by which an analyst can approach a country and assess what is happening. While the book is not primarily a policy tool, it is an academic analysis that has several policy implications. One of these is to try to devise a better diagnostic tool. I see the academic analysis as a complementary tool to quantitative analysis. Once a country looks like it might be in the danger zone, we can use that tool to figure out whether the country really is at risk, and whether or not it is moving in the direction of escalating violence.

FLETCHER FORUM: *So, the forecasting is the initial level, and your diagnostic is the next step?*

STRAUS: Exactly. It is designed both to identify patterns of violence, and

also look for what kinds of patterns are happening in certain places. It also has a predictive side that enables us to determine whether these trends happening at the national level will help us understand what is going to happen.

FLETCHER FORUM: *It seems that actors at the national government and international organization level are increasingly interested in coordinating these predictive strategies and actions—take the Atrocities Prevention Board (APB) initiated by the United States, for example. How has this kind of coordination evolved since the international dialogue on genocide really began in the 1990s?*

STRAUS: In my world, there has been a huge change since the 1990s. First, there has been a real change in terms of norms. There is a stronger sense
 that committing atrocities is wrong,
There is a stronger sense and no government should be allowed
that committing atrocities is to do it. These are clear standards and
wrong, and no government clear statements. Second, there have
should be allowed to do it. been significant changes on the policy
 framework side. At the United Nations
 level, you have the emerging norm of
 the responsibility to protect (R2P), and
 in the U.S., you have the presidential-level actions—directives and the
 subsequent Atrocities Prevention Board—and so forth.

These are not panaceas. Although R2P is a very contested norm, it is a clear effort to state under what conditions international actors can act to protect civilians from large-scale atrocities. That has been a pretty significant change.

In my view, the third change has been civil society. There are more people who care about the issue of genocide and are willing to make demands on their politicians to stop it. None of this is going to stop things in itself, and situations are very complicated, as we have seen in Syria, but I do think there has been a significant shift since the crises in Rwanda and Bosnia twenty years ago.

FLETCHER FORUM: *One of the results of this change in norms regarding atrocities has been a series of attempts to formally charge cases in the International Criminal Court (ICC), but to date it has generally been difficult to prove genocidal intent. Do you think that your research, drawing on these state narratives and founding narratives, could be used to change and inform how genocidal intent is defined or proved?*

STRAUS: I am hopeful that this research will help clarify what genocide is. This clarification would be less in terms of founding narratives and the dynamics of war and the explanatory story, and more in terms of the conceptual analysis of what genocide is. I argue there that there are these three properties of genocide: that it's group-selective violence targeting certain groups; it's sustained on a large scale; and then its logic is exterminatory, where the aim is to entirely
 destroy the group. I think that this kind of conceptual analysis will help in terms of being more precise about what exactly genocide is and how to measure it. It's a way of measuring intent, and a way of operationalizing a definition of genocide. While lawyers have to stick to the UN definition, this analysis is a way of trying to substantiate some of the vagueness in the convention, putting it in more concrete terms. In that sense, I'm hopeful. It's difficult to know what's in people's minds, but the analysis allows people to look at patterns of violence on the ground and determine whether or not they are consistent with genocide.

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FLETCHER FORUM: *Based on that analysis, do you see any areas of the world that are at risk of genocide that we are not looking at, or that we are overlooking?*

STRAUS: I think wherever you have armed conflict, and you have elites who are seriously threatened, that is where you have the danger of genocide. We see a lot of those situations. In my view, though, it's difficult to carry out genocide in a situation of state breakdown. There might be atrocities, but it's difficult to carry out larger-scale, coordinated violence. By that logic, Myanmar looks more at risk than the Central African Republic; Sudan or South Sudan look more at risk than the Congo for this type of violence.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Thank you. f*

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Scott Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa* (Cornell University Press: New York, 2015), Appendix, p. 333-342.